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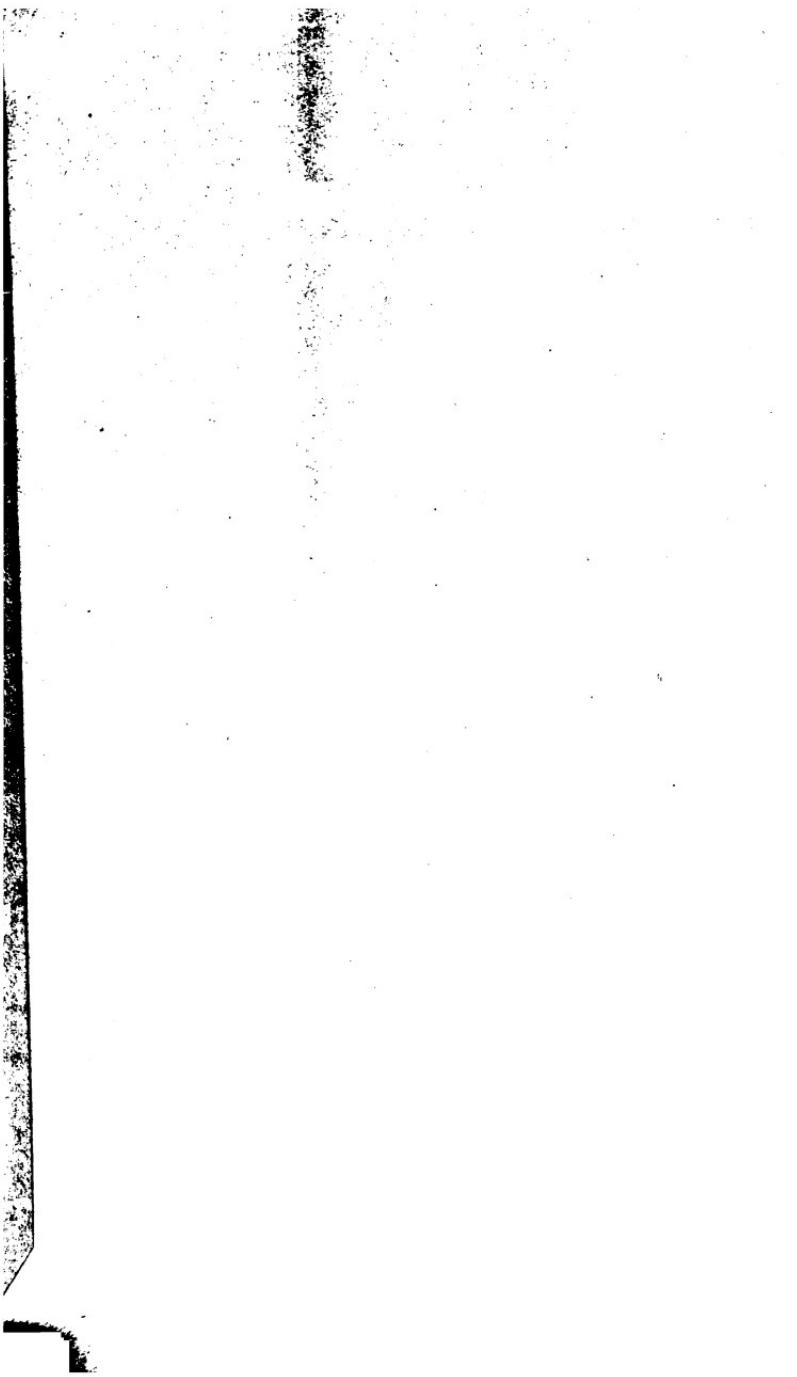
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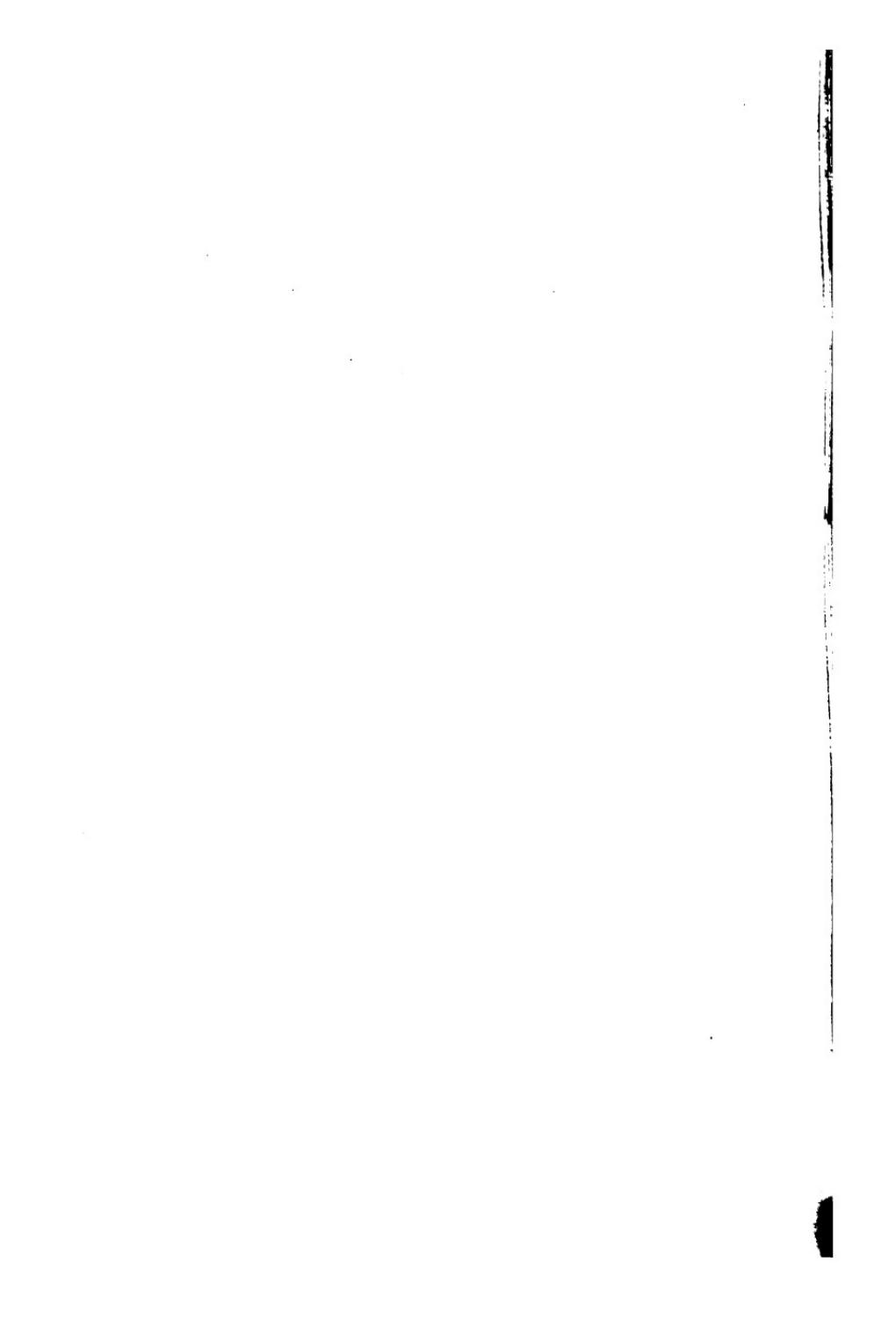
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HARRY R.
S. W.

THE IVORY DISC

BY

PERCY JAMES BREBNER

Author of

"A Gallant Lady" "The Turbulent Duchess"

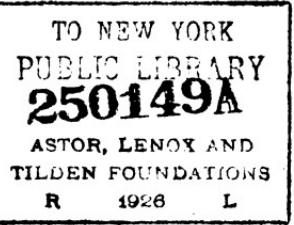
"The Little Grey Shoe" Etc.



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THE IVORY DISC



THE IVORY DISC

CHAPTER I

He was of those strong men who, whether they do right or wrong, do it without fear.

I

AS HE came out of the Star and Garter Hospital at Richmond, Bruce Oliver filled his lungs with the fresh air of early morning. It was good to be alive, good to have free use of every limb, good to close the door on all the suffering, all the terrible disabilities which these walls enclosed.

"I feel like a walk, Williams," he said to his chauffeur who had been dozing, "meet me on the other side of the Park—at Robin Hood gate."

"Yes, sir."

As the car slid smoothly away, Oliver consulted his note book.

"Ockenden to lunch with me; to-night the 'Lion's Den,'" and he smiled. "I wonder how Lady Dealtry manages it in war time. It might be amusing, if I go, which is doubtful. Being considered eccentric has advantages, you are graciously pardoned for all sorts of social crimes."

He glanced back at the walls behind him, as if the depression of the place still had hold of him, then entered the

Park and struck across the grass in the direction of Penn Ponds.

Dr. Bruce Oliver was nearer forty than thirty, yet he was still considered among the young men, chiefly because he occupied no definitely recognized niche in his profession. Many medical men, trying to square their own conservatism with modern progress, called him an enthusiast with absurd ideas and theories, something of a heretic. They would have welcomed him with open arms had he been nearer the commonplace. It could not be denied that he had had a brilliant career as a student, and that since then he had devoted himself to the study of the brain and nervous system, writing much upon the subject, but the conclusions he had arrived at were pronounced more revolutionary than valuable. One opponent had gone as far as to call them the distorted dreams of an ill-balanced mind. Criticism did not trouble Bruce Oliver. He was a rich man. He could afford to spend his time in study and experiment, leaving his consulting practice to look after itself. He was not very interested in normal cases, and many of his patients had only come to him as a last resource, when all other treatments had failed them. That he had successfully performed operations which no other man would attempt had prejudiced a large section of the profession against him. This prejudice had been strengthened by the lay press which on several occasions had discussed his work in a sensational manner, speaking of him as a man who cared nothing for human life so long as science was served. There was little sentimentality about Dr. Oliver, and as a body he detested the anti-vivisectionists, but there was nothing brutal in his nature, and he was an enemy to all suffering, human or otherwise.

For a time he had been at one of the base hospitals in *France*. He told nothing of his experiences, it was diffi-

cult to make him talk of the war at all. Now his chief energies were devoted to the utterly broken wrecks which had been sent home, seemingly useless flotsam in the current of the world's economy. Such a case had brought him to Richmond in the very early hours of the morning, and the hopelessness of the case had saddened and depressed him. That is why he had elected to walk across the park. He wanted to be in touch again with full and healthy life.

The time in France had altered him. Mentally and physically he was fit, but he was living at undue tension. A weaker man would have been at the breaking point. His hair at the temples was touched with grey, the keen lines of the face had an edge on them, and the grey eyes seemed to look a little beyond the sights of earth and sky. At first he walked slowly, like a tired man, an effort was necessary before he could get into his normal athletic stride, and there was a suggestion of having to shed some covering before he could fully enter into the joy of the morning. Men considered his face hard and unsympathetic, women were inclined to think it interesting, if not handsome; and it may be the difference of opinion was due to the fact that, unconsciously, he was more reserved with men than with women. The difference was certainly unconscious, for Bruce Oliver cared for no opinion, either man's or woman's, and the world's criticism left him wholly unmoved. He was of those strong men, who, whether they do right or wrong, do it without fear. Great saints and great sinners are in this respect of the same brotherhood.

The crisp air of early morning had not yet let go of the world. The spirit of eternal youth hung over wood and bracken, and a golden haze clothed the distances in

uncertainty and mystery. London was far away, much further than mere milestones indicated, and here, at this hour, was the heart of the country where a man might wander without meeting a soul to disturb his reveries. The trees were full of song, deer lifted their heads for a moment to gaze at the intruder, and from the depth of a wood yonder a heron sailed up lazily on its way to the river.

Bruce Oliver had the power of detachment, the ability to let his brain lie fallow for a while and absorb unconsciously the sights and sounds about him. He had begun with an effort, now he was a part of the morning, of the beauty and perfume of it, at one with the very pulse of existence, feeling the life in everything, even in the loose stones which his feet trod into the yielding, almost throbbing turf. The heart of a child was in him; he was in touch with that spiritual reality which lies even within things material. The spirit of adventure was his, the hazy, golden distance might hold romance. He was bathed in new vitality, just a healthy animal in touch with Mother Nature, the primitive in him at the surface.

He paused as he came in sight of the ponds, dimpling and sparkling in the sunlight. A clump of wood hid their full extent. It was easy to imagine that these glistening waters stretched away into infinite distance, and Oliver was a boy again in fancy, deep in the excitement and peril of some trappers on the margin of a Canadian lake. The water held a fascination for him, and he slowly skirted the upper and the lower pond, dreaming vague dreams, too unsubstantial for words or concretes thought. Then he climbed some rising ground with quickened step and plunged into a wood bordering an enclosed plantation. The direction did not worry him, he wanted to be amongst the trees, and he went straight before him where there

was no path, trampling through the bracken and the long grass.

There are places in Richmond Park which few people seem to discover. They lie close to the beaten tracks, but just off them. On Sundays a pair of lovers may wander here by chance and congratulate themselves on their isolation, but as a rule these retreats remain undisturbed. Such a spot Oliver was approaching. At the unexpected invasion a startled deer got up close to him and bounded away, and a pheasant with a whirr of wings rushed into the air. Then Oliver stopped suddenly, almost as startled as the deer and pheasant. He, too, had encountered the unexpected.

3

On a seat under a great oak at the top of the rising ground sat a girl, a great Dane lying at her feet. Her hat was on the seat beside her, a dog lead was in her hand, and if she had seen the bounding deer or noted the pheasant's rising she evidently did not attribute the sudden activity to anyone's approach. She remained perfectly motionless, and the dog did not raise his head. The morning sun, glinting through the breeze-stirred foliage of the trees, dappled the wood with quivering patterns, and a shaft of light fell upon the girl at intervals. Screened by the trees and fern brake, Oliver watched her. He was too far away to see her face clearly, but whenever the sunlight touched her it gave her charm and mystery, emphasized the graceful lines of her white clad figure, and turned her hair to gold. In this sylvan setting she looked beautiful.

Women had played little part in Bruce Oliver's life, yet at this moment, perhaps because the primitive in him was near the surface, there came a great desire to look into the

eyes of this woman, to hear her speak, to stand beside her, to know her. And why not? He had only to go straight forward to pass close to the seat. The circumstances would excuse a greeting, an apology for disturbing her reverie, and a word of admiration for the dog might easily serve to start a conversation. His body swerved an instant to take the first step towards this end, but he did not take it.

The girl had suddenly stood up, erect, motionless. The dog did not move, did not even raise his head from his outstretched paws. For a few moments she stood motionless, and then her arms were flung out and upwards as though she made invocation to some spirit of the wood. There was complete abandon in her gesture, an all absorbing purpose in it, a suggestion of passionate longing for something unattainable. Her figure was alive with the energy of supplication. Her lips moved but no sound came, if she prayed it was silent prayer, and she must have done the same thing before now or the dog would have shown some excitement. For some time she stood in this attitude, a beautiful figure, perfect as the dream of a Grecian master; then the tenseness of her pose relaxed and she sat down again as suddenly as she had risen, glancing neither to right or left, showing no fear of possible discovery. It was this moment that the dog had been patiently waiting, for he got up and rested his great head on her knees as if he understood and was full of sympathy.

Who was she? Where had she come from? More than ever Bruce Oliver longed to go forward and speak to her. Why not? This was Richmond Park, free to all who choose to walk in it. This wood was no privileged spot that the girl could resent intrusion. Thus the practical side of him urged him to go forward, but a greater force held him back. The girl's supplication had made of this wood a *sanctuary*, wherein it was sacrilege to tread unbidden. The

idea held him, gripped him in spite of his desire to jeer at it, and turning, he went back by the way he had come, stepping cautiously to avoid betraying his presence, long after all caution was unnecessary. And presently, looking back from an upland of the Park over a wide stretch of turf, he saw that the girl and dog had come from the distant wood and were going briskly in the direction of Sheen Gate.

4

To Bruce Oliver women were chiefly an interesting study. Beyond a process of definite labelling he did not go. He had placed and catalogued them in the world's museum of wonders, as it were, pausing occasionally to admire the beauty of one specimen, or the marvellous capability of another, and showing almost an uncanny knowledge in his judgment of them. He had treated men in much the same way, but with less attention to detail, finding them less complex. Sex was for him merely a difference of functions. His life did not hold a single sentimental episode. He had not escaped that admiration which a certain type of woman is always ready to give to a man of outstanding personality, but it had made no impression on him. If he had noticed it at all he smiled at the curious specimen which had been brought under his observation, and perhaps added to his collection of notes for a book he contemplated dealing with the nervous development of women under modern conditions. He did not dislike women, was inclined to treat them with the same freedom of thought and speech as he used to men, but he had never come even within the shadow of love. Today's adventure was a new sensation to him, and as he stood watching the girl until she was out of sight he wondered why she had

raised in him a sudden desire altogether foreign to his nature.

Turning towards Robin Hood gate he was inclined to become analytical with himself. Had his time in France done something to change his nature? A nausea against such unnecessary suffering as he had witnessed might have brought with it a kind of savage reaction, a passionate longing for all that was normal in life. He had seen destruction mental and physical, was he unconsciously grasping at creative force to adjust the balance? A woman, suddenly encountered under exceptional circumstances, might stir into quick life a latent desire of this kind—a desire for woman, for love, for children. This would be a new life, a new creation, a stepping out to the future, something definite in a world which was rocking on its foundations, something definite in a future which was so obscure to statesmen, philosophers and moralists. Practical common sense urged that this girl was a very ordinary person taking her dog for his usual walk, and that being young the spirit of the morning had got into her blood. Perhaps she had a vein of romance in her, or it might be that the world's tragedy had touched her, and being alone, she had stood to petition the Almighty for the safety of a lover fighting on French battlefields. It might be so, such a girl must certainly have a lover, yet the explanation did not satisfy Oliver. The adventure had had an effect upon him which he was convinced no ordinary woman could have produced. Late last night he had been working in his laboratory when the call had come for him to go to Richmond without delay; he had meant to resume his experiments, which were of an absorbing nature, as soon as he returned, but realized that he was wholly unfit for work today. A new and mysterious life was tingling in his blood, calling him into unknown paths, giving him a thirst for

strange experiences. He was full of dreams and visions and pleasant uncertainties, in that mood when men are inclined to let themselves go, and having made fools of themselves, plead as excuse that irresistible force of the Pagan spirit which at intervals will seduce the most evenly balanced minds.

His car was waiting just outside the park gate, and he was startled to think how much had happened since he had sent it away from the hospital. He had travelled further than across Richmond Park. His adventure in the wood was more than an episode, and the temptation to spurn wisdom for a time and dance a wild measure with folly was strong upon him. The Pagan spirit had him in thrall, and it was a good thing for him that Ockenden was coming to lunch. And before he had reached town Bruce Oliver had decided to appear in the "Lion's Den" tonight. It would be time wasted, but that would be better than time actively ill-spent in sowing for a future harvest of regrets.

CHAPTER II

"I am of the East only by adoption."

1

"CANON FLEETWOOD," a servant announced, and as the ascetic looking cleric, in the uniform of a chaplain of the forces, crossed the room towards his hostess, a man standing with a girl in the embrasure of one of the windows turned to look at him.

"New, isn't he, Phil?"

"His first appearance," the girl answered in an undertone. "Mother heard him preach at St. Mark's—socialistic Christianity culled from Tommies in the trenches. You mustn't laugh at mother, Gerald."

"Why, my dear, I think Lady Dealtry is perfectly wonderful; besides, I owe her a debt of gratitude for tolerating such an unimportant individual as myself."

"Yes, she is wonderful," said the girl, glancing at her mother, admiring her, but in common with many other people failing to comprehend her. "I fear I am a severe trial to her. I seem to be her only failure."

Lady Dealtry had begun life as the only daughter of a country parson. Her father's orthodoxy, which was as narrow as his means, had bound the girl in fetters until she was past her first youth. She seemed destined to spend all her life in parish work and the boredom of unimaginative tea parties, when chance brought into her small circle Sir Charles Dealtry, the eminent scientist, who held

honorary degrees from universities at home and abroad, and had been created a Baronet by a country proud of his attainments. He was no longer young, was looked upon as wedded to science, and succeeded in astonishing everybody when he married Lucy Whitcomb. Of course she had married him for his money, the cynics said, but what attraction could she have had for Sir Charles? The cynics failed entirely to appreciate the latent capabilities of the country parson's daughter. The union had been a happy one, and very far from prosaic. Sir Charles found a new zest in life and renewed his youth, while his wife came out of her shell with astonishing rapidity and amazing results. Her personality had been strangled by her commonplace surroundings, now she intended to impress it upon the world, and was not contented to be merely the wife of a distinguished man. She accomplished this in three ways. She developed a pleasing eccentricity in dress, modernized Greek in character, fully aware that it suited her classic style to perfection, and thus she became conspicuous and a central point in every gathering she attended. Then, by making the most of her attainments, and by giving her judgments in slow and well considered phases, judgments, be it said, which were usually diametrically opposed to commonly accepted opinions, she established a reputation as a keen critic of men and manners. Thirdly, she had published a novel which, although not a masterpiece, had raised a perfect storm of divergent criticism. Remarkable for its advanced views, it was eagerly read by those interested in modern ideas, and even more eagerly devoured by those who were shocked by them. It was therefore a great success. Lady Dealtry had travelled far since the days of Sunday school and mothers' meetings in her father's parish.

The Dealtrys' dinner parties at Lennox Lodge, Kensing-

ton, had become a fixed social function. Invitations were eagerly sought after, and those who succeeded in getting them considered themselves among the elect in thought and art. Someone who had failed had contemptuously spoken of Lennox Lodge as the "Lion's Den," and the name had stuck. Only those who had done something to distinguish themselves were likely to have part in these entertainments, and since fame and notoriety are easily confused, a strange medley was often the result. As Lady Dealtry said, a certain catholicity was absolutely necessary. If you only brought together people who agreed with one another, you might form an excellent mutual admiration society, but you would assuredly have a very dull evening.

During the war, patriotism and food difficulties had induced Lady Dealtry to give up these dinners; she gave suppers instead. It was not easy to tell the substitute from the real thing, but the change of name, and the half hour's alteration in time, seemed to give the hostess a sensation of sacrifice, just as her efforts on flag days and at Red Cross bazaars gave her a sensation of strenuous war work. She had hard things to say about all classes of slackers, and when the papers recorded that Lady Dealtry had spent the whole morning selling flags on behalf of Belgian prisoners in the artistic vestibule of Messrs. Berriington's stores, she felt that the world must be aware that she was nobly playing her part in the great conflict. Moreover, she was careful there should always be some khaki at her supper parties.

2

Possibly Philippa Dealtry was right when she said her mother must find her a severe trial. An extraordinary child would have fitted into Lady Dealtry's scheme of life,

whereas Philippa was just an ordinary girl, pretty, graceful, brimming over with the joy of life, sunshine in her face and in her heart, and with no eccentricity of any kind. At Lennox Lodge no eccentricity could have been half as disconcerting as her common sense attitude. Science she found rather tiresome, especially when its votaries quarreled, which they often did; she considered actors and actresses quite uninteresting off the stage; and although appreciating art and literature, she had no great desire to know artists and authors. They were seldom as stimulating as their work, she declared. Not easily enthusiastic, she had a perfect genius for seeing the weak points in her mother's guests, and instead of helping her mother at bazaars and flag selling she insisted on the less spectacular role of a V. A. D. To crown all she had set her affections on a man who was not distinguished in any way.

Gerald Palgrave had been called to the Bar, but no excitement had been caused in legal circles either at the time or subsequently. On his own confession he hardly knew what a brief looked like, and had occupied his enforced leisure with the pen. Fame had not come, but an invitation to Lennox Lodge had, because Lady Dealtry had been much impressed with an article of his on the Iniquity of the Divorce Laws. At a later date he confided to Philippa that he was not very much interested in the divorce laws, but at the moment they had seemed a good subject to write about. Lady Dealtry, however, had prophesied a brilliant future for the writer, a prophecy she began to doubt on a closer acquaintance although she did not say so. She never admitted a mistake, and since Philippa was absolutely without ambition, she accustomed herself to the idea of a mediocre marriage for her daughter. For quite an ordinary individual Gerald was rather a dear, she thought. *A limp, the result of an accident in childhood,*

had barred him from active service and he was working in the Ministry of Munitions.

Other guests had followed quickly on Canon Fleetwood's arrival and stood about the room in small groups. Carson, the artist, and his wife who lectured on education, were talking to Sir Charles. King, the actor, famed as the most perfect lover on the stage and the worst caricature of it in private life, was holding forth to the Canon and Professor Bennett, the latter frankly bored because he believed the only really interesting subject in the world was geology. Everett the novelist, whose sale in cheap editions was enormous, was talking to Martha Houghton, a Red Cross nurse, recuperating after thrilling experiences in Serbia, and an airman, a boy home on leave from the front where he had done marvellous things which no one had succeeded in getting him to talk about. If Everett were out for copy both nurse and airman must have disappointed him.

Nurse Houghton turned quickly as Bruce Oliver was announced.

"This is a delightful surprise," said Lady Dealtry. "I always expect an eleventh hour excuse from you."

"A doctor is never his own master," he answered, "especially in these times. Tonight I am fortunate."

He had shaken hands with Sir Charles, and had joined Philippa and Palgrave by the window, when Anthony Ockenden was announced. There was a sudden hush in the conversation, heralding the coming of a considerable person. He was a tall, fragile man, with long, thin hair, and a loosely jointed figure which seemed to be insufficiently nourished. His evening clothes were old-fashioned, looking as if they had been made for a much larger man, and he wore a soft fronted shirt, and an eccentric black tie which flopped from underneath a soft, turned-down collar.

He stood for a moment in the doorway, glancing vacantly round the room as if he were imploring someone to tell him where he was and how he came to be there.

"The great poseur," Palgrave remarked.

"Is it possible for a legal mind to appreciate a poet?" Oliver asked.

"And he is a great poet," said Philippa. "Only a great poet could have written 'The Questing of the Perfect Knight,' and his patriotic verse makes the efforts of others appear mere doggerel. The pity is that, after being thrilled by his work, one should have to know him personally."

"Perhaps the outside is the worst part of him," said Oliver. "He was lunching with me today and was quite interesting."

"I should never have suspected you of liking poetry, Doctor," laughed Philippa.

"I don't. We discussed analine dyes. Ockenden knows quite a lot about the process."

"I suppose we are complete," said Palgrave. "Ockenden usually contrives to be the last arrival."

"The Bocaras are not here yet," Philippa returned.

"Bocara?" queried Oliver.

"He is a teacher of Oriental languages—an Egyptian, I believe. His wife is wonderful. You have the privilege of taking her in to—to supper."

"And it may be a startling experience," laughed Palgrave. "She may turn up in native dress, or—"

"Madame Bocara," the servant announced.

3

"Alone!" Lady Dealtry exclaimed, going forward to meet her.

"It is a pity, but the Professor is not well. He is not

really ill, you know, but he cannot go out. I wanted to send a message, but he would not let me."

"Why madame?" Oliver whispered to Philippa. "Is she French?"

"She is always called madame."

She was European, but Oliver could not fix her nationality. She was quite young, twenty-five at the most, a little strange, a little bizarre even, but beautiful—it is the only word to describe her. Perhaps the mass of her gold-brown hair gathered loosely about her head made her face seem rather small, a little short from forehead to chin, but it was a passing criticism, forgotten in a moment. Her eyes were blue, deep set, dark blue eyes, steady yet elusive, giving little clue to what manner of woman she was. Her mouth was firm and strong, her coloring delicate but warm, and her voice was low, intense, not made for trivialities. She spoke with a certain deliberation as if she had to feel for her words, indeed, she used wrong ones occasionally, and had a curious accent. Perhaps her husband spoke English imperfectly, Oliver thought. Certainly her dress must owe something to his influence. It was of black and dull gold, showing the supple lines of a perfect figure without emphasizing them; there was a note of Oriental richness about it, a breath from the bazaars of the East. Her jewelry was unusual and barbaric in tone. A single ruby, set in a gold band which encircled her hair, scintillated like a tongue of flame, and five rubies, pendant upon an almost invisible chain, gleamed like blood drops upon her fair throat. She wore too many rings, a burden for such delicate hands. Oliver wondered what manner of man her husband was.

Some of the guests she knew, but her manner of greeting them was curiously detached. Ockenden, as he shook hands with her, evidently paid her a compliment which seemed

to please her for a moment, but the next instant her eyes seemed to look into the beyond as if she had no interest in her surroundings.

"Cleopatra or Trojan Helen?" queried King in Oliver's ear.

The doctor laughed, not at the actor but at himself, at the strange fact that in one day he should see two women who fascinated him when all his life he had gone scathless. At the sound of his laughter Madame Bocara turned in his direction, and Lady Dealtry beckoned to him.

"I do not think you know Madame Bocara, Doctor?"

"I have not that honor."

"Estelle, this is Dr. Bruce Oliver, of whom you have heard, no doubt," and the introduction made, Lady Dealtry left them facing each other.

Estelle Bocara slowly shook her head, the smile on her lips gradually breaking into a little laugh.

"No, of course you have never heard of me," said Oliver. "Most of us are far more ordinary than Lady Dealtry imagines, and are seldom very interested in each other's pursuits. Science is inclined to scoff at art, and art naturally abominates the dissecting room."

"Is that quite true today?" she asked. "I am not a clever person either in art or science, but surely the novels which sell, and the modern play——"

"Perhaps you are right," Oliver returned. "They are rather reminiscent of the operating table I understand, experiments in moral and immoral dissection. I seldom go to the theatre, and I am sufficiently interested in real life to leave modern novels alone."

"You are—science?" she asked.

"Yes. That does not displease you, I trust."

"No, only when it has to do with death."

"Science deals with life, too, but we won't talk science

tonight. Which way lies your chief interest in life?"'

It was a natural question since they had met at Lennox Lodge.

"I am struggling to be happy. I like being with happy people. When you laughed just now I said to Lady Dealtry: 'Who is that?' I was very glad when she said you were my supper partner."

"Laughter does not always mean happiness."

"But in your case?" she asked.

"My enemies say I laugh like a school boy to conceal the calculating wickedness of a devil."

"I do not believe that."

"I think it is an exaggeration myself," Oliver returned.

"And your friends——"

"They are neither many nor enthusiastic."

"Perhaps I shall be different," she smiled, and then supper was announced.

4

Bruce Oliver was exceedingly conscious of his partner and of himself, there was a desire to monopolize her, to isolate her. The girl of the morning was forgotten, the woman of tonight had possession of him. She was beautiful, not conforming to any type, something universal about her. Although he had never heard of her, she might be famous for her beauty, perhaps that was why she was a welcome guest at Lennox Lodge. The pursuit of happiness which she claimed as her mission in life could hardly place her amongst celebrities.

"It is strange we have not met before," she said, turning to him when they were seated. "I shall tell the Professor about you and he will explain all you have done. About the people who are doing things he always knows."

Oliver was conscious of resenting Professor Bocara. He did not want this woman to talk of her husband. He could not think of her as a married woman, as belonging to any man. A new scheme of existence was in his thoughts tonight, this woman the centre of it, and in it there was no place for Professor Bocara.

"And I shall like listening to what he will tell me," she went on. "I shall know that he speaks of my friend."

"You already call me friend, then?"

"Is it too soon to put thought into words? I know, so I speak. It is my way. It is very wonderful to have a real friend."

"And if the Professor should speak evil of me?"

"It would not matter, I should not believe it. When you laughed I was suddenly happy. It was like meeting someone you had waited for a long time. That was our real introduction. Lady Dealtry's was mere form—nothing. Did you feel like that?"

It sounded like one of those profound questions a child will ask sometimes, difficult to answer and tell the exact truth. Oliver was spared the necessity of answering it, for at that moment, Ockenden, who was on the other side of the table, leaned forward:

"Have you seen my latest work, Madame Bocara?"

"No. I am sorry."

"I will send you a copy which shall be precious, which shall contain a dedication that has come to me only just now, a gem caught in my brain, tossed there out of the whirling ocean of poetic thought. I think you must have been in my mind while I was writing what is best in my new work."

Most of the guests turned towards him. It was characteristic of the gatherings at Lennox Lodge that conversation was apt to become mere discussion, or was altogether

lost in a lecture. Ockenden was a poet of a very high order and might be worth listening to even if he did lecture. Oliver seemed to be alone in resenting the interruption.

"It is a fantastic tale of the East," the poet went on, absorbed in himself and in the woman whose beauty he seemed to devour with the intensity of his gaze, "a tale of love, deep and mysterious as—as a woman's eyes, burning as the noonday heat, slumbrous as the velvety night, full of that overpowering passion of which the West knows nothing."

Estelle Bocara was silent. Oliver was angry. What right had Ockenden to look at her with the beastly desire of a hungry wolf, or to think of her and believe her honoured by the thought?

"I did not know you had been in the East," said Sir Charles.

Ockenden turned to him but had no answer ready. From the other end of the table Lady Dealtry came to his rescue.

"The poet needs only the eyes of imagination," she said in a manner suggestive of settling a difficult point for all time.

"In my dreams I have visited the glowing East," Ockenden said in his high-pitched voice, "and have looked deeply into the hearts of men and women there. It is the heart I touch, the life centre, seeing the reason of action, and the significance in the scheme of existence. I see no common flower upon the highway, I look behind it for the meaning, the spirit truth."

"This kind of thing must bore you pretty stiff," said Palgrave in an undertone to the young aviator who sat beside him.

"No. I understand what he means," said the boy. "I've gone up from the aerodrome on a dull day right through the clouds into the sunlit blue, and sang and been

alone with—well, I can't say it, but he could. I'd love to take him for a flip of that kind."

"I expect he would rather dream about it," said Palgrave with a smile.

"And to some purpose, perhaps," said Philippa. "He may yet write an ode to the aeroplane equal to his 'Song of the Guns.' "

"By Jove! Did he write that?" said the boy. "It's top hole, Miss Dealtry. I know a gunner chap who's mad over it, who says only a fellow who has lived day and night with the guns could have written it, and most likely the chap yonder has never slept beside a gun in his life. Rum thing, imagination. It gives fact points and beats it every time."

"So I conceived my poem," Ockenden was saying, "and I placed it in the East because there intensity and spiritual insight are paramount. I shall value your opinion of my work, Madame Bocara."

"Can it be of value—my opinion? I am of the East only by adoption."

"A beautiful thought," sighed the poet, "the absorption of the material into the spiritual, the gradual sinking of hot and lusty life into the peace and tranquility of Nirvana. It shall be my next theme. You are fortunate enough to have inspired me. You shall see yourself in glowing words. Poets, like painters, have their models."

"Talking of models," Carson began—and then Oliver said in a low tone to his partner:

"Heaven send he will interest Ockenden and the rest of them until the end of supper."

"Why?"

"We were talking of happiness."

"And he speaks of love," she said.

"I sometimes think one is as great a delusion as the other," said Oliver.

"Don't say that," she returned earnestly. "You will make me doubt, and I like to believe I have met people who are really happy, that great happiness is possible, that it is not merely a splendid garment in which to hide some deformity."

"Have you no personal experience to judge by?"

"No. It is difficult to explain, but I am conscious, at least I think I am, that the happiness I feel at this instant is not a real condition. It is transitory and only comparative. I am not miserable, therefore I am happy."

"And love?" Oliver asked.

She looked at him, and for a moment he seemed to gaze into the unknown through the depths of her eyes.

"I have said I have no personal experience," she answered slowly. "It is strange and incomprehensible to me, because although I am of the East only by adoption, there is much of the East in me, far more than I can appreciate or understand. I never talk of it, I might frighten people."

"You will not frighten me."

"It is curious that I should be so certain of that, but I am. We are not strangers. Your existence and mine are as two spinning circles in space which have touched each other in their turning long before tonight, and just because they are circles, tonight we are conscious of the old vibrations. We renew friendship, whether for good or ill who shall say? The high gods are over fate. You see how much of the East there is in me. That priest yonder—I do not know his name—would hold up shocked hands. He is satisfied with his beliefs and thinks all the rest of the great world is wrong. Isn't it presumption, ungod-like? He is only an atom like the rest of us. You understand, of course?"

"Yes."

"And listen, I want to tell you of myself," she went on, "but how shall I? It is so difficult to find words to express real thought, because thought is never really fixed, but always in flux, ever changing a little in the rushing torrent of life. So it is with me. I am incomplete. I am a wine skin, lacking the wine, yet saturated with the perfume of it. There is fire in me, but it is of hot ashes, and there are no bellows to blow it into flame. I am not like these Western women, neither good like some, nor wicked like others. I am an instrument waiting for a master to touch, to awaken the music in me. I cannot live easily, I am not contented. A husband, home, money, beautiful things to wear, pleasure, these are not to me everything."

"And children?" Oliver asked.

The question seemed to astonish her like a new thought.

"Would they make all the difference?"

"Some difference, certainly."

"I have never thought of children," she said after a pause, and the intimacy of the conversation did not appear to occur to her. "It is perhaps because I have not yet done thinking of myself. I have not yet grown up. I am always stretching out to something which it seems I ought to have, but I do not reach it. There are times when I am nothing, as if I did not really exist, but it is not often so. Generally I am fretting against the limits which hold me. I would fly had I wings, fly and never return, fly as I have seen birds in the East fly, straight into the glowing heart of the setting sun."

Neither wholly woman, nor wholly child, she was certainly a pagan, Oliver thought, and he was inclined for a moment to think of her as a specimen, more beautiful and incomprehensible than any he had known, but the next instant he saw only the woman who had set his pulses throbbing, who might be dangerous if he would follow conventional ruts.

"And the Professor?" he asked.

She laughed, a musical cadence that had joyousness in it.

"The Professor! He would still go on teaching Oriental languages."

5

"I think you did not hear me, Dr. Oliver."

Bruce Oliver looked up quickly to find the geologist's eyes fixed upon him, and the consciousness that there was a momentary silence round the table.

"The question is, Dr. Oliver, 'What is a miracle?'" laughed Lady Dealtry from the end of the table. "The Canon is more or less orthodox, Mr. Ockenden says it is one form of imagination, Professor Bennett pins his faith to latent mental disease, and Sir Charles clings to some obscure germ theory."

"I must leave the explanation to the Canon," said Oliver.

"I only insist, I do not attempt to explain," Fleetwood said.

"Miracles, so called, are born in imagination," said Bennett with the precision he used when addressing a class, "imagination in a virulent form. Essentially Ockenden would say the same, but parts company with me when I go further and state that imagination is rooted in mental disorder, in disease in short. It is a question which impinges on your line of study and experiment, Oliver."

"It is certainly one I would rather discuss in private, in your study or mine," was the answer.

"Never go to a specialist if you want a definite opinion," laughed Palgrave.

"Then Shakespeare must have been a chronic invalid," King remarked.

"In a scientific sense he was undoubtedly," Bennett retorted. "Genius is madness, any exact line of demarcation is beside the point when dealing with fundamentals, and madness, I take it, is a disease, Dr. Oliver. No private discussion is necessary to establish that fact, I presume."

Oliver merely shrugged his shoulders, leaving it doubtful whether he considered madness a disease or not. He refused to be drawn into the argument. He had told Madame Bocara that he would not talk science tonight. She sat with her hands in her lap, apparently quite uninterested in the conversation.

"Imagination is a sublime gift," Ockenden burst out passionately, "a gift by which visions are seen, and the truth of hidden things breathed into the hearts of men—fundamental truth, Professor, the great fundamental which all you scientists always leave out. Plagued with facts, believing only what you can see and handle, it is easy to scoff, but your material creed is worthless, because every sane man is conscious of a soul which links him to the everlasting. And upon this soul the imagination plays until it trembles into exquisite harmony which you wretched laborers amongst hard sterile facts have no ears to hear."

"But, believe me, we are listening," said Sir Charles.

"Yes, with the cotton wool of prejudice in your ears," the poet returned excitedly. "For you there are only narve centres, sympathetic ganglia, brain cells, things you can point to and explain. Your science has never found the soul."

"We are content to leave it to the imagination," and Bennett's scornful laugh was like the sudden shifting of pebbles in a narrow gully.

"You deny it in the face of the evidence which is shouting at you every hour of the day," Ockenden returned.

"Young men are dying in France for ideals. Will all the science in the world compel a man to sacrifice himself for his country and his fellows? No, it is the soul in him which does that. Can science tell me why the most primitive heathen must needs invoke some god of his imagining? Has science discovered the reason of a mother's love? Has your horrible dissecting room told you any of these things, Oliver? Or you, Professor, has enlightenment come from your stones and mud?"

"We seem to have wandered from the point," said Lady Dealtry.

"From miracles, indeed, yes," said the Canon in a pulpit manner.

Everest was getting copy about Serbia from Nurse Houghton, and the young aviator, having explained gliding turns to Palgrave, was telling Philippa that he considered the V. A. D.'s splendid, especially one of them who had nursed him in hospital. It was perhaps a glance at their eager young faces which made Sir Charles somewhat judicial.

"This war is likely to rejuvenate the world," he said. "It is the day of youth, and we older men may find ourselves panting for breath in our endeavor to keep pace with the times. We may be on the threshold of new discoveries. Bergson has taught us something, has opened new fields of thought, and Vitalism has taken a bench in the workshop of Science. I can see some of our theories and beliefs being relegated to the scrap heap before we are much older. Our friend Oliver is one of those who is moving with the times. He may have much to tell us later."

"His investigations have left him dumb apparently," Bennett snapped, "while my mud and stones prove that matter invariably obeys certain laws which no amount of

imagination, nor soul, nor anything else is going to alter."

"I prefer our talk on happiness," Oliver whispered to Estelle as the Professor gave signs of plunging into a geological lecture. She did not answer him, only her hands moved a little in her lap, and then she began to speak in a low, intense tone which compelled silence and attention.

"I have known strange happenings in the East which no man has explained, nor can. Belief has gone deeper there than here because the truth seekers are less self-absorbed, and power has been given them which is supernatural. In the places of the bodily dead the spirits of those dead whisper strangely, and some of the living have learnt to listen. Sometimes only a little is understood, sometimes much, it depends how closely the living are in touch with the dead things unseen and to come, with all that lives but has passed out of the world, with all that lives waiting for material birth. The power lies in faith not in science, in life not in death, and men are given understanding of things past and insight to foretell what shall be. And because knowledge is not yet perfect in anyone, and because many roads lead into the great highway of truth, there are many gods in the East, manifestations of the one great God; and to their priests and priestesses, to their worshippers and devotees, is given at times more than mortal power, it may be for good or ill, power over life and disease and death. Good and ill are words which we passers through the world use; to the gods they are meaningless, because knowing all, there is for them only good as the ultimate end. All else, though it be evil, is probationary. I have known a man die without cause in the full pride of his life because a curse was upon him. I have seen a man wither like a dry leaf because he had angered the gods. In the beyond all is planned from all time to all time. Inevitability is the

unbreakable law. Nothing but the preordained can happen. Though a man never goes near sea nor river, yet shall he drown if so it is ordained. Man comes and goes, living his span upon the earth, travelling the road marked for him, and no other, from one fixed point to another point equally fixed. No circumstances shall change the inevitable. It is a short span from a dawn to a dark, life coming out of shadows and hurrying on to one sure episode—death, which is change, no more. Only fools would expect science to explain what is beyond all science."

6

She stopped as suddenly as she had begun and seemed unconscious that everyone was looking at her, and that silence reigned round the table.

Bruce Oliver had turned towards her as she began to speak, and was held fascinated, not by her strange mysticism, not by her beauty even, but by her subtle personality. He had supposed her fame must rest on her beauty, but she was also a mystic, speaking with curious authority. He had thought of her as half woman, half child, and she had spoken like a priestess certain of her knowledge. Less than ever did he understand her, he did not attempt to spur his brain into an endeavor to comprehend; he was content to know that she had brought a new and abiding factor into his life—herself. He did not speculate upon the consequences, he only realized the change. She, too, was aware of the change, had already spoken of it, had come close to him in thought, without question, without fear of being misunderstood. The inevitable had happened. It was her creed, and his soul, shaking free from pre-conceptions, acknowledged it true. For good or ill they had met; the past was over, the future remained. That

she was married made no difference. They had met as from all time it was intended they should, and life was touched with a golden glory even as the rising sun bournishes the waking world with morning.

"Why do you look at me so?"

She turned to him. The question was not asked in a whisper, everyone could hear it, but she only seemed conscious of his scrutiny, only from him did she ask and expect an answer. She was detached, still mystical, mentally feeling her way, aware only of the man beside her.

"Esoteric Bhuddism," murmured Canon Fleetwood.

"Hamlet's creed," said King.

"More likely old Bocara's," said Palgrave.

"Your inanity is almost refreshing, Gerald," whispered Philippa. "I do not like the inevitable. I have never heard Estelle talk like that before."

"Madame, one of the men you speak of died from stroke, the other shrivelled from some internal disease," said Professor Bennett, with a last word manner about him. "The stroke may have been apoplexy, caused by the sun, perhaps, and I have little doubt the disease germ which accounted for the shrivelling could be found in my mud."

"Madame is right," Ockenden burst out excitedly, furious at the Professor's cold scorn. "She is—"

"More artist than scientist, and that appeals to me," said Carson.

"I wonder whether a closer study of the religions of the East would help the cause of education in this country," speculated his wife.

"It would ruin it," said the Canon as if he alone were qualified to give an opinion.

"If anyone could persuade me to ignore the teachings of science you would, Madame," said Sir Charles, leaning towards her.

Estelle did not appear to hear him. She paid no attention to any of the comments. She was still looking at Oliver, still waiting for his answer.

"She is right, absolutely right," Ockenden insisted in his high-pitched voice, made more shrill by excitement. He would be heard. "She is right. She has seen, she knows. The East has held fast to fundamental truths which the West has forgotten. In my great poem—I was telling Madame—in my great poem I have expressed all—all. These lines will show, yes, I will quote. I have tried to—to—I have tried——"

He sprang to his feet, flinging out his arms, while his lips moved as if he were reciting, but no sound came.

"Mr. Ockenden!"

Lady Dealtry half rose from her chair, and every face was turned towards the poet.

"My poem," and his fact twitched as if he were trying to smile at his own enthusiasm. "My great poem—a little—a long time ago—I—I thought——"

Then one hand went to his heart sharply, a dull thud against his body. For one instant he stood erect, his eyes fixed on vacancy, and then he pitched forward across the table. There was the sound of breaking glass, the red stain of wine upon the cloth, there were quick exclamations, and the sudden scrape of chairs as the guests sprang to their feet—then silence.

In a moment Bruce Oliver was beside him, bending over him.

"Good God! He is dead," he said in a hushed whisper.

CHAPTER III

It was not impossible that virtue and protection lay in this trinket of ivory and silver.

1

IT WAS midnight when Bruce Oliver left Lennox Lodge to walk home. The police had been summoned and had made their preliminary investigation, the guests had departed, the dead man lay for the night in the darkened library. It had been a terrible ending to a wonderful day. The setting of the tragedy, the brilliantly lighted room, the remains of the feast, the atmosphere of luxury and full life, had made it more appalling, and it was only natural that excitement and confusion should have followed quickly on silent dismay. Mrs. Carson was inclined to be hysterical before Lady Dealtry had got the ladies out of the room, and Madame Bocara had stood behind her chair as if unable to move until Philippa had led her away. A few minutes later she had fainted in the drawing-room, but by the time Oliver had been called to her she had recovered, and was angry with herself for causing so much trouble. Oliver had sent her home at once in his car, declaring that she must consider herself his patient.

It was chiefly of her Oliver thought as he walked homewards, of life not of death. After all, Ockenden was a mere acquaintance with whom he had little in common, whereas Estelle Bocara was part of himself. The fact that a few hours ago he had not known of her existence

mattered nothing, the inevitable moment of meeting had come, and henceforth their destinies were linked together. Until now life had meant to Bruce Oliver power and energy to concentrate on those problems in his profession which he had set himself to study; tonight the goal which he had deliberately chosen seemed unimportant. He was in touch with something infinitely greater, some great purpose, something he did not understand yet accepted without question. He was on the threshold of a revelation waiting to be fully initiated. He was not in the least conscious of love, therefore the thought of Professor Bocara did not trouble him.

Oliver let himself into his house in Hobart Place and went to his study. He opened the letters which had come by a late post, noted appointments without feeling any interest in them. His mind was wholly with Estelle. She was his patient, tomorrow he would see her. He realized that he did not know where she lived. Sir Charles had given Williams the address while he had been making her comfortable in the car. It did not matter, Williams would know where to drive tomorrow. Then he caught sight of a single glove lying on his table. A servant must have picked it up and put it there. It was Ockenden's, of special color, with special stitching, made for him, and eccentric as was everything else about the poet. He must have dropped it when he left after lunch. It brought the night's tragedy forcibly back to Oliver's mind; the whole scene, every incident in it, came back in its due order with photographic clearness like a film on a screen. As he had pronounced Ockenden dead he had looked up, had seemed to take in at a glance the attitude of each guest. He remembered thinking that Lady Dealtry was not so calm as he expected she would be, and that Bennett, who was the cause of the poet's excitement, did not seem to believe

his statement. Then he had looked again at the dead man, recalling his last words, his movements just before he fell across the table. He looked at the glove now, and those last words and movements came back to him with curious inconsistency. It was as if the spirit of the dead man were compelling him to think of them. A wild possibility shaped itself in Oliver's mind, and in spite of a rush of argument against it, he reached to the ultimate meaning of such a possibility, and was afraid.

He took some brandy from the tantalus on the side-board, and drank it neat, not as a man who drinks merely but as one who swallows hastily a necessary dose of medicine. Then, changing his dress coat for a jacket which was stained and had seen much service, he went to a door in the panelling of the room, which might easily escape notice. There was no handle, a small key opened it, but as Oliver put the key into the lock he paused.

"No, I am not fit to form any judgment tonight," he said, almost as if he were arguing with an unseen presence. "Tomorrow, perhaps, or when I can fully concentrate upon the investigation, but tonight, bed."

2

No investigation had taken place when Williams drove his master to call on Madame Bocara the following afternoon.

Throwing out greedy tentacles of brick and mortar, London is constantly devouring its rural surroundings, and places where wealth was manifest quickly shows signs of the struggle for existence. Old houses vanish, their grounds become eligible building land, and pretentious villas and dreary roads take the place of pleasant orchards and shady gardens. Occasionally an old house remains,

shorn of most of its acres, looking strangely out of place in its plebian surroundings.

Small villas adjoined the high walls which hid her house from the road, and others stared at the high wall from over the way. This wall was comparatively a recent structure, the road having evidently been driven through part of the grounds. Once within the gates, however, the painfully modern aspect of the world without was forgotten. The old house, creeper clad and mellowed by time, stood in a garden of trimmed lawns, of flower beds bright with color, of winding paths and shady trees.

As Oliver walked up the short drive he did not take much notice of his surroundings. He felt the necessity of getting himself well in hand, for he was conscious of keen excitement. Today he could not detach himself and the woman from the rest of the world as easily as he had done last night. The man in him had become assertive, the veil of mystery about her could not conceal the fact that she was a woman. This well ordered house and garden might be the setting of an ordinary woman, it suggested a lower level than Oliver had imagined, a meaner attitude of mind, it emphasized the ordinary world and its judgment; it gave importance to Estelle Bocara's husband, and was a reminder that if love be unlawful men and women may touch sordid depths.

The night had brought thoughts of love to Bruce Oliver, wholly against his will. If he loved it was not as other men, he argued, it was mentally not physically. With all his learning and experience he failed to see the pitfall of considering himself an exception. Some great passion may link two souls in a spiritual union, but not often is this so, more often passion brings mad and unlawful impulse wrecking lives and begetting infamy. No one knew this better than Bruce Oliver.

The mysterious again held sway when the door was opened by an Oriental, dark of skin, suave, deferential in manner, his tread as light and silent as if he stepped on thick folds of velvet. His master was expecting Dr. Oliver, he said, as he led the way across a spacious and dim hall. He spoke softly as if he were afraid of waking some slumbering secret in the house.

3

As Oliver entered the room a man rose quickly from a low armchair, and came forward to meet him with a smile of welcome and an outstretched hand.

"I am glad, very glad to know you, Dr. Oliver. Something of your work I have been aware of for a long time."

Professor Bocara was a small, slightly built man, with delicate clear-cut features. His hands and feet might have been a woman's, yet there was nothing effeminate about him. There was a suggestion of strength in him, he was intensely alive, he was vigor and health personified. Dark, penetrating eyes gave a look of pallor to his olive skin, his mouth was purposeful, his voice soft and seductive. Princely breed might be his. He looked a student, fitted into the book-lined room which was Oriental in tone with an atmosphere of peace and seclusion in it, a place for meditation and thought. Oliver had expected a very different type of man, a much older man, and had to rid himself of preconceived ideas, always a difficult process.

"I trust Madame Bocara is better," he said, seating himself in the chair the professor drew forward.

"She is quite well. As a doctor you are not required, no, not at all; as a friend, why yes."

He spoke English with a curious intonation. Like his wife he seemed to feel for his words.

"I am glad. I thought perhaps——"

"I know, she has told me. It was nothing, a little faintness. It was kind of you to send her home in your car."

"Such a sudden death was a shock to all of us," said Oliver.

"And to my wife, death, even to talk of it, is painful. Of course I do not understand that. My attitude of mind is so different. To me death is just a happening and does not much matter."

"I should have thought Madame's attitude would have been much the same—judging by her conversation, I mean."

"Ah, Dr. Oliver, you must remember she is a woman, and women do not so readily act on their natural lines as men do. You cannot be so sure of them. They are greater and less than men, but for the ordinary judgments of life not so reliable. They are individual, they seldom act well together."

"Once I should have agreed with you," said Oliver, "But I fancy this war is teaching us a lot of new facts about women."

"Yes, they have been splendid, and along lines other than their natural ones. Woman is splendid, but as I have said unexpected. War will end and then—then again she will do the unexpected. And all this talk from me just because I speak of my wife's attitude towards death, and I finish by explaining nothing. I have met this poet Ockenden once, and I have thrilled at his Empire Songs. He will be a great loss. It is good for a country to have her glory sung so finely. What caused his death?"

"I am not sure," said Oliver.

"I like to hear you say that, it is so honest, so great. Doctors will so seldom admit ignorance, and many poor patients suffer in consequence no doubt. I wish I had been at *Lady Dealtry's* last night, the conversation must have

been interesting, but I was a little unwell. Your climate is not always good for me."

"I did not know Ockenden well," said Oliver. "I should want to know more about his past health and history before giving an opinion as to the cause of his death."

"My wife has told me everything." He became excited. The poet is not like other men. His genius touches unknown forces and may release powers he is unable to control."

"I do not quite follow you," Oliver returned, wondering how much Estelle had really told her husband.

"You do not find me practical, ah, but is it not a foolish word, this practical, marking limits where there are none. I think you must agree that man's nature is a battleground whereon rival powers are constantly struggling for the mastery."

Oliver acquiesced with an inclination of the head. Ordinarily the conversation would have interested him, but today it stood in the way of his seeing Estelle. He began to wonder whether the Professor intended that he should not see her. He might possess great influence over his wife. The beliefs which she had uttered last night might be only the reflection of his, and it was just possible she had told him everything, even of their intimate conversation.

"Every man," Bocara went on, "being free-willed, brings his own personality to bear upon the struggle, and so we face a problem of the resultant of forces. If a man is on the side of evil, evil may suddenly claim him."

"You go beyond me, Professor. I am of the West."

"But you are of those who grasp far and wide for truth, and the West begins to learn something from the East, although still despising it. Indeed, yes, it is beyond denial," Bocara persisted as Oliver made a gesture of dis-

sent. "Because in the East men have looked deeper into the unknown, the West either considers them as fools to be pitied or as charlatans to be laughed at. I am of East and West, an unfortunate heritage, for by both I am a little despised."

"I cannot believe that, Professor."

"Still it is so. I am a strange mixture. My father was Egyptian, but there was a current of French blood in his veins which has had its effect upon me. He was a restless man, a traveller, and found his wife in India. There was a Persian strain in her. She was high-born, my mother, and connects me with princes in India. Mentally and physically I bear the marks of my strange parentage."

Oliver smiled. Bocara was boring him.

"And that is not all. Education has mixed me still more. I was sent to England, to Cambridge, where I distinguished myself, and then I travel in Europe so that I may speak freely in many tongues. I love France, the great soul of her, and in Germany I find amusement in their boastfulness and strange philosophy which has made this war. It is really a religious war although no one calls it so. In Egypt I join with a party of excavators and learn much, then I go to Persia, and Arabia, and into China, but it is India that I love most—my birth land, where my father and my mother lived and passed on. Then I married."

Oliver was keenly interested at once.

"Ah, you wonder why I have such a wife, everybody does. Why not have married one of my own people, they ask. But you see, Doctor, I really have no people. It was a difficult position."

"I can hardly express an opinion," said Oliver.

"Yet there is speculation in your eyes," and Bocara smiled. "When such beauty might have made some splendid match, why does it belong to a teacher of Oriental

languages? That is the common speculation. Together my wife and I sometimes laugh at it."

Oliver could not believe this was true, but he made no comment. He waited for Bocara to tell him more.

"So you see, Doctor, you have interested yourself in a very strange couple, unlike any other you know."

"And I am fortunate, Professor."

"Ah, it is too early to decide, our acquaintance is so young. I will explain one thing. Because I teach Oriental languages it does not mean that I must do so to live. This house could not be mine from the little lessons I give. No, I teach because it brings me in contact with men who are thinking, who are doing things, who are making the future. Today I make a new acquaintance and am glad. Now we will go to my wife. She will give us tea."

4

Remembering last night Oliver felt that he ought to consider himself a potential scoundrel. With a different type of man he would have done so, but Bocara seemed so conscious of dominating the situation, so satisfied with himself, that the fighting instinct in Oliver was aroused. He felt that Bocara had marked out for him certain limits of friendship, perhaps already suspicious of the real reason which had brought him to the house today, and Oliver determined that he would be guided only by the woman. Ordinary conventions could have no place in a house like this, in the atmosphere of such a man as Bocara. To some extent undoubtedly Estelle had been influenced by her husband, but Oliver could not believe she was merely his reflection in thought. Her personality was as distinct as his; it was her own creed she had uttered last night not his; there could not be the unity between them which *Bocara suggested*; Oliver felt antagonistic, and even specu-

lated whether he might not be a deliverer from some horrible bondage under which the woman lived. He was too much absorbed in the mystery of this affair to remember that such an idea has been the excuse of most unlawful loves. It is the easiest thing in the world to give the part of ogre to the husband.

As Bocara opened the door both men came to a standstill on the threshold. Framed in an arched corridor reached by three steps from the hall, stood Estelle. She was simply dressed in white, a scarlet flower tucked into her waistband.

"I thought you were never coming," she said.

Her eyes were fixed on Bruce Oliver, and he might have heard some hidden meaning in her greeting had not his whole attention been given to a sudden discovery. As she spoke she threw out her arms in a foreign, almost exaggerated welcome, but it was curiously familiar to Oliver. She was the same woman he had seen in Richmond Park yesterday morning, flecked with sunlight as she stood in an attitude of abandoned invocation. It was strange he should not have made the discovery before and yet understandable. Last night she had been richly Oriental, in the morning as now she had been simply dressed, just a perfect specimen of young womanhood, no jewels at her throat, no gold and ruby flame in her hair, and the only ring she wore was the plain circle which proclaimed her a wife. He had not been close enough to her in the park to see her clearly, and last night he had marvelled that two women should have influenced him on the same day when all his life had been passed outside woman's influence. There was only one woman, he had only seen two phases of the same personality. The next moment the great Dane came along the corridor and stood beside his mistress. *She glanced down at him quickly, for he growled.*

"Quiet, Karac!"

"You have that brute in the house again," Bocara exclaimed. "I ordered——"

She turned sharply towards him. The action made Bocara pause, and Oliver wondered if they would have quarreled had he not been there. Bocara was angry, his wife calm and a little indifferent.

"Yes, in my room," she said. "I thought I closed the door to keep him there. Marie! Marie!"

In answer to her call a French maid came along the corridor.

"Take Karac, Marie. Take him back to his kennel. Good dog! He shall come in again presently. He interrupts my welcome, Dr. Oliver," she said, coming down the three steps with extended hand. "He was not growling at you or I would have whipped better manners into him. The Professor hates dogs and Karac knows it. That is why he growled."

"I do not hate dogs, only that dog, and——"

"I wanted him in my room today. I was alone and wanted him, so he came. I did not intend that you should see him. I would not have him frighten you, but of course he must come to my room when I want him."

"It is nothing, Estelle, it does not matter," said Bocara, and it seemed to Oliver that he was afraid of offending his wife.

"But it is something that you have kept Dr. Oliver in your room," she laughed. "It was to see me he came, and he has been too long making your acquaintance on the way. Shall we go to tea?"

dows looking on to the garden, bright with color, and with the long shadows of afternoon on the lawn. The room was Oriental, luxurious but with no suggestion of the museum about it. These costly things from the East had not been merely collected and used in a decorative scheme, they were part of the integral life of the house. In a recess, almost a small room in itself, was a grand piano, opened and with music on it. To Oliver there was a certain sense of unreality about the woman standing by the low tea-table which sparkled with costly china and old silver. She was of today, of the moment almost, charming but not mysterious, a well-bred woman of the world entertaining an ordinary guest, very beautiful but not the woman he had expected. Last night they had been soul to soul, affinities; today he was of no special interest to her.

"I need not ask if you are better," he said presently.

"I am quite well. I was myself when I arrived home," and she glanced at her husband for confirmation.

"I should not have known anything had happened," he said. "I have been saying, Estelle, that we need no doctor, but welcome a friend of whom we hope to see much."

He had not been so explicit as this. He waited for his wife to agree with him, but she seemed indifferent, wholly engaged in selecting a fancy cake from a silver basket.

"Yes, we must certainly be friends," Bocara went on. "We shall agree in many things yet differ sufficiently to strike sparks from each other's mentality. And there are many things in this house I shall take delight in showing you, things unique, in England at any rate."

"It is very beautiful," Oliver said. "You have settled in England for good, I presume."

"*For good* is a very, very long while," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. "It will depend upon my wife."

Bocara glanced at her but she showed no interest in what he was saying.

"She suddenly grows tired of a place and the people in it, then we go. It has always been the same."

"Perhaps it is your own roving spirit which yearns for change," said Oliver.

"Ah no, for our sudden departures, Madame is responsible."

He spoke almost as if Estelle were not there, yet evidently he was very conscious of her presence, and Oliver got the impression that in some way he was endeavoring to impose his will upon her.

"I have been thinking, Estelle—today week, might not the Doctor dine with us today week? Just ourselves, a trio. It would be very pleasant."

"Today week," she mused, as if she had to consider many engagements. "Yes, you will dine with us that night, won't you, Dr. Oliver?"

"I shall be delighted."

Her manner changed. She deftly turned the conversation to general topics. She did not refer to last night's tragedy, she seemed to have forgotten last night altogether. She led the conversation and her husband agreed with everything she said: indeed, as they talked of travel, of books, of art, of people, it seemed to Oliver that Bocara was subservient and considered his wife his superior. Surely hers was the dominant personality however he might strut in private. Almost a slavish deference was in his manner now, and he seemed gratified at any small attention she gave him. It was as if he had entered into competition for her favors, and Oliver could easily have pitied him had he himself been the recipient of any special attention. There was no need for pity on this score. Estelle was as beautiful and as entirely fascinating as she

had been last night, but she was quite different. By no stretch of imagination could Bruce Oliver imagine that she had the slightest interest in him beyond that she might have for any visitor. There was no suggestion that he had any significance for her whatever. She talked and laughed like a clever, happy woman filling the room with a sweet personality, but she struck no deep note.

Oliver did not understand her and was a little resentful. He was as completely under her influence as he had been last night, but there was something meaner and lower in it, less a mental attraction than a physical. Last night he had been conscious only of the inevitable and seen no danger, now the danger was clear to him, and he realized that he must not come to Lantern House if he would avoid making a fool of himself. A three-cornered situation did not appeal to him. The dark-skinned man watching her, as he himself was watching her, was her husband. It was a horrible fact, but Oliver faced it. Possibly his wife loved him and was content to be the spoilt darling of this rich man from the East. Bocara was not astonished at her attitude, he was evidently accustomed to it. Perhaps he was aware that his guest had expected something different and inwardly rejoiced at his disappointment. Why was she so different from the woman of last night, yet in a subtle, incomprehensible way the same? Palgrave's laughing warning that she might come in native dress recurred to Oliver, and suggested moods and inconsistencies in her. Was she something of an actress, fond of dressing and playing a part? She had been more priestess than anything else last night, why play such a part as that? The speculation sent Oliver's mind racing on a strange mental journey, one he had no desire to take.

"Dr. Oliver."

She had suddenly spoken to him in that low intense

voice which from the first he had realized was not meant for trivialities. Not once had he heard it this afternoon. Again the woman and child was mingled in her, knowledge and innocence, as she looked at him exactly as she had done last night.

6

"Dr. Oliver, it was very good of you to lend me your car. I have talked much but have not yet thanked you. You were very good to—to a stranger. Please do not contradict me," she went on quickly, almost as if she were afraid of what Oliver might say, "I was a stranger, and in India, especially in certain parts of India, care for the stranger is—is rewarded, if possible."

"But Estelle—"

She waved her husband's objection aside.

"It is a custom which has always appealed to me, and you must let me have my own way, Dr. Oliver. I am not accustomed to be denied. It is only a little thing, a trinket which no one would buy, of no intrinsic value, yet it has worth or I should not give it."

She held out her hand to him. Lying in her upturned palm was a small, oval disc of ivory, out of which, but not in the centre, a piece in the shape of a parallelogram had been cut. Across this opening were two thin silver bars so placed that they formed, unconsciously or by design, a Christian cross. On the ivory several hieroglyphics were lightly cut and had been stained to make them clearly visible. There was a silver ring to suspend it by. Certainly it possessed neither intrinsic value nor artistic merit.

The moment Bocara saw what it was she intended to give he rose to his feet in hasty protest.

"Estelle, I cannot allow——"

"I insist," she answered with a swift look in which there was a challenge.

It was an awkward position for Bruce Oliver. The Professor evidently expected him to refuse the gift, his wife was equally determined that he should accept it.

"If you will trouble Dr. Oliver with an absurd Eastern custom, and if his Western prejudices will allow him to take any gift, offer him something better worth his acceptance," said Bocara.

"This and nothing else," she said quietly, but very definitely. "Take it and wear it always, night and day. It is an amulet in which there is virtue. A doctor runs constant risk in his fight with disease and death, this will protect you."

If he must offend one of them better the professor than his wife, Oliver thought, as he took the ivory disc in silence.

"You said Dr. Oliver was a student not a practicing physician," Bocara said.

"No evil can touch the wearer of that amulet," she went on, taking no notice of her husband. "He is under the special protection of the high gods."

She was the mystic of last night, and there was a suggestion that she was parting with a possession she greatly prized.

"Its virtue has gone," said Bocara. "Scorn has killed it."

"Dr. Oliver has not scorned it."

"But you have by parting with it, and I have little doubt the doctor scorns it too by not believing in it."

Bocara spoke quite calmly, his mouth even smiled, but there was anger in his eyes, the look of an animal savage for prey. In spite of Estelle's insistence Oliver had been

inclined to refuse the gift which seemed to thrust him between man and wife, this trinket which the professor was so anxious he should not have; now his whole being, without volition of his own, was in antagonism to this man. He felt no anger, only deliberate opposition. It was personal and had nothing to do with the woman.

"I shall wear it believing that the virtue remains," he said, putting the ivory disc in his pocket as he rose.

Estelle smiled contentedly and held out her hand. Now she had got her way she seemed anxious to bring his visit to an end.

"Then we shall see you this day week," she said. "At eight o'clock."

7

It was curious, Oliver reflected as he was driven home-wards, that the moment he approached some definite opinion concerning Estelle Bocara, a change in her scattered all his ideas, compelling him to reconsider her personality. Was she a creature of superlatives in manner and in speech, or was there some profound reason for the difference between the woman of the tea-table and the mystic who had spoken to his soul last night and had given him the amulet today? What was her history? What strange fate had linked her to a man like Professor Bocara? Personal antagonism to the man remained with Oliver, and the fact gave Bocara increased importance. He had sped his departing guest with the utmost courtesy and friendship, as though the awkward position of a few moments ago had not occurred, but what had he done when the door was closed? His oscillations between attempts at mastery and the subserviency of a slave were curious. *Estelle's power and influence over him appeared*

to be great, but were they sufficient protection against the man in whose eyes he had seen such savage anger? Oliver began to imagine horrors. If virtue were in the amulet she had perhaps far more need of its protection than he had.

He took out the ivory disc and looked at it, not because Estelle had given it to him but because she believed in its efficiency. Did he? Two days ago he would have laughed at such a question. Like most men born into a fixed creed, learning it and its attendant responsibilities in childhood, much as he had learned his Latin grammar, he had grown up in that faith. He was not a religious man in the accepted meaning of the word, but in the widest sense he was a believer—a believer in ultimate good. The Christian faith he believed to be the highest form of truth, but he was very doubtful whether man truly understood it. He held that priesthood, and the emphasizing of certain tenets to meet difficult times in the Church's history which were past, had gradually raised upon a foundation which in itself was sure, much that obscured the real truth, and led men into a narrow groove of thought utterly antagonistic to true religion. He did not conceive it possible that any man, or any band of men, could be wholly right, and all others wrong; he conceived that all forms of religion, as practised and understood, were parts of the great and eternal whole. Faith was for babes, but it was also for the most profound scholars the world could produce; how then could any man made creed contain all truth? Many roads lead into the great highway of truth, Estelle Bocara had said last night, and it expressed in a sentence Bruce Oliver's faith and religion. Her words came to him now as he looked at the amulet. Nothing was impossible, to admit it would be to deny Almighty power. It was not impossible that virtue and protection lay in

this trinket of ivory and silver. Fools might call it superstition, but then fools were always ready to be scornful of what they did not understand.

In Piccadilly Oliver stopped the car and bought a thin but strong gold chain, and when he got home he fastened the amulet round his neck.

CHAPTER IV

*"I am never likely to judge you by the world's standard,
I have been too near the fighting line to judge any
man that way."*

1

THAT Anthony Ockenden had died suddenly at Lennox Lodge inclined many of those who had scoffed at the "Lion's Den" to a greater appreciation of Lady Dealtry's place in the literary world. She must be of some importance or she would not be entertaining so distinguished a guest. The fact that Ockenden was dead caused considerable excitement, the manner of his death was hardly commented upon, and for a day, at least, eulogies of the poet occupied as much space in the papers as the war news. Undoubtedly he was a true poet, but many critics were not content with this; they declared that his more serious work, not so well known, was full of that new thought and insight which were destined to be the guiding principles of the world of tomorrow. Ockenden was called the chief star in that group of younger writers who alone stood for progress in poetry, prose and the drama, and a list of a dozen names, some of them almost unknown to the general public, was given of men whose achievements were relegating the work of their immediate predecessors to oblivion, and proving the majority of their contemporaries to be mere pedlars in stagnation.

Whether Anthony Ockenden had been gratified by the adulation of this school was exceedingly doubtful. His attitude had always been individualistic, and it is certain that his literary fame rested on better and cleaner work than most of the members of this school had produced, or were capable of producing.

2

Gerald Palgrave with a heap of newspapers beside him was discussing the merits of the poet at Lennox Lodge with Sir Charles and Philippa, Lady Dealtry was thoughtful and expressed no opinion. She had not been able to shake off the horror of the tragedy which had happened in her house, had been silent and preoccupied, and had spent most of her time in her own room.

"Well, I confess surprise at the unanimity of the critics," said Palgrave.

"Probably that is because you knew him personally," returned Philippa. "You cannot separate the man from his work."

"Prejudice is easy I grant, but so is over statement."

"And criticism is often more concerned with itself than with its subject," said Sir Charles. "What I have read of Ockenden I admire. I must know more of him before I feel competent to give a definite opinion as to his ultimate value. At present I am not inclined to place Shelley and Browning, and even one or two others, on such a top shelf that I cannot get at them."

"We are more concerned with the man than his work," said Lady Dealtry suddenly, as if the discussion irritated her. "When is the inquest?"

"Tomorrow," Palgrave answered.

"You will find that emphasis will be laid on the fact that he died in this house," Lady Dealtry went on. "It

is a marvel to me that the papers have not commented upon it already. Have you forgotten how John Scrivener was found dead in his study barely three months ago?"

"But what connection is there between him and Anthony Ockenden?" asked Sir Charles.

"The servant found him when she entered the room on the early morning. He had fallen across his writing table."

"Yes, I remember—heart disease."

"He died exactly as Anthony Ockenden died," said Lady Dealtry, "only he got home first. He had been dining here."

Gerald Palgrave folded up the newspaper he had on his knee. It was the only sound in the room for a few moments.

"A coincidence, nothing more," said Sir Charles.

"It is one many people are likely to remember," Lady Dealtry returned, "and they will talk. It is likely to be exceedingly unpleasant for us."

"Not a paper so far refers to it," said Palgrave.

"Talk cannot hurt us, my dear," said Sir Charles.

"You are optimistic. We have been sufficiently exclusive to make a crowd of enemies. Besides——"

"Yes, my dear, yes out with it. What have you got at the back of your mind which is troubling you?"

"Was it merely a coincidence?" Lady Dealtry asked, turning to her husband.

"I am glad this question has arisen," Palgrave said after a pause. "Ockenden's death has been worrying me considerably. Who were the guests on the night Scrivener dined here?"

"I don't know," said Philippa. "I was staying at Cheltenham with the Butterworths."

"You were here, Gerald," Lady Dealtry said. "I tele-

graphed to you at the last moment, you remember, because someone had fallen through. The Lorrimers were here, Heath and the Everests, Dr. Oliver, Professor Bennett—no, he disappointed me and you took his place."

"Was Oliver here?"

"Yes. He left early, directly after dinner. He hasn't been here since until the other night."

"Why make such a point of Oliver's presence?" Sir Charles asked with some irritation.

"To be quite candid I thought his manner rather strange the other night," said Palgrave.

"What rubbish."

"I thought so too, father," said Philippa.

"That does not make it any the less rubbish."

"He gave me the impression that he had seen a similar death before," said Palgrave, "that he realized it was not an ordinary seizure. You will remember, Sir Charles, that no definite opinion was to be got out of him. He seemed very careful how he answered the questions of the police. Not once did he make any suggestion and took the initiative with evident reluctance. That is not a bit like Bruce Oliver."

"You are remembering all the nonsense people have talked about him," said Sir Charles.

"I must say I agree with Gerald," said Lady Dealtry.

"I thought he was so fascinated with Estelle Bocara that he found it impossible to concentrate on anything else," said Philippa.

"Your idea borders on immorality," answered her father. "Bruce Oliver wasn't meeting a clever and pretty woman for the first time in his life, and I know no man less likely to make a fool of himself."

"Exactly. That is why I noticed it so particularly," said Philippa.

"I am making no accusation against Oliver," Palgrave went on. "I am supposing he had some reason for his reticence. He may know a great deal more about Ockenden than we do Philippa's reason for his curious attitude had not occurred to me."

"I do not admit there was anything curious about him," said Sir Charles.

"Philippa's is possibly the explanation," said Lady Dealtry, "but it does not help us to understand the connection between Ockenden's death and Scrivener's."

"Take my word for it, there is none," returned her husband.

"I am sorry I cannot accept that as a statement of fact, Charles; I wish I could. Unfortunately I appear to be in opposition to most of the opinions you express today. Estelle is not clever only unusual, and pretty does not describe her. She is beautiful. And in my experience the greatest folly is always committed by the very man you least expect to make a fool of himself."

"Indirectly, at any rate, we are getting rather personal and indiscreet," said Sir Charles. "We have no right to talk as we are doing. Estelle Bocara is a married woman."

"That does not make her less fascinating, father," said Philippa.

"And might possibly add to her attractiveness if Bruce Oliver is inclined to make a fool of himself," said Lady Dealtry.

"We are imaginative this evening," said Sir Charles, going out of the window on to a balcony as if a breath of fresh air were necessary to him.

Steps led down to a small patch of garden which was full of fitful moonlight. There was hardly a murmur of the distant traffic. In a house nearby a man was singing.

"Listen!" Palgrave exclaimed. "That is one of Ockenden's love lyrics."

"Living thought," Philippa whispered. "It is not very easy to believe in death."

3

The inquest on Anthony Ockenden caused some sensation, but not of the kind Lady Dealtry had anticipated. The fact that the death had taken place at Lady Dealtry's dinner table caused no comment, and John Scrivener's name was not mentioned. The post-mortem revealed that the internal organs were diseased, old before their time, worn out. Hard living had been undermining the man's constitution for years, and an extra strain of excitement had served to bring the breaking point. It was suggested that he might have been a drug taker, but there was no trace of drugs in the body, although the heart was in a condition for which it was difficult to account. It might be an obscure form of disease. The doctors who made the post-mortem were doubtful on the point, and in his evidence Dr. Oliver was unable to make any suggestion. He had met Anthony Ockenden on several occasions, and the deceased had lunched with him on the day of his death. He had not been in an excited condition then. He had become rather excited by the discussion in the evening, and Oliver agreed with the other doctors that a very small thing might prove fatal to a man in his abnormal condition. A jurymen was persistent in asking whether Dr. Oliver had formed any opinion of the cause of death when he saw the sudden collapse at the dinner table. Oliver said he had not. It was easy to attribute death to heart disease, but no medical man would definitely do so without further examination, or without knowing something of a

patient's general state of health. He was not Ockenden's medical man; the dead man had been no more than a casual acquaintance and he knew nothing whatever of the kind of life he had led. The verdict that death was due to natural causes was the only one possible.

Even after the inquest the actual circumstances of Ockenden's death might have been more fully discussed, had not a further sensation developed out of the enquiry. Before there was time to trace or dispute the first rumors, the news had become an uncontested fact. Ockenden had been far more than eccentric, he had been absolutely dissolute. He had lived a triple existence. There had been periods of solitude and isolation during which, no doubt, his real work had been accomplished; and these had been followed by a round of dissipation, when he had appeared at private and public entertainments, often drinking too much, genius and buffoon by turn, making many enemies yet always advertising himself. And there were other times when the poet set no limit to his excesses, when he revelled in haunts which were shunned even by the ordinarily vicious, in hells one shrank even from mentioning, and for days, sometimes for weeks together, the man who could touch the sublime sank into the lowest depths of beastiality.

The truth was a terrible shock to the men and women in whose houses the poet had been received as an honored guest. In the outburst of righteous anger both truth and error were exaggerated and distorted.

4

Bruce Oliver read every line of comment, and spent long hours in his laboratory. He avoided the club where he knew he was likely to be questioned, and limited his recreation to a solitary walk in the afternoon.

He returned from his walk one afternoon to find Nurse Houghton waiting for him.

"Hallo! Little Mother, what can I do for you?" he exclaimed.

"Nothing. I have come to try and do something for you."

He had called her Little Mother for a long time past. A mother she was by nature although fate had denied her a home with children in it. Their friendship had begun when she had nursed him through a severe illness years ago, and in some of his cases which had occasioned controversy she had nursed for him. Probably no one knew more of Bruce Oliver than Martha Houghton, and certainly no one appreciated him so nearly at his true value. A wide-minded, large-souled woman, she realized the worth of his work and yet saw clearly that much of the criticism hurled at it was partly his own fault, due to the manner and attitude he adopted towards his critics and the world generally. Often she had fought his battles, denying the stories which he would not take the trouble to deny himself, and on more than one occasion she had pointed out to him that no man could afford to treat the world's opinion with the indifference he did.

Oliver put her into the most comfortable chair.

"I suppose another lecture is due," he said. "Even in the stress of your work in Serbia you have been preparing one for me."

"No. I only thought of you once or twice out there, when doctors decided that operation was useless. I thought you would have risked it and—and succeeded."

"I took some risks while I was in France with most interesting results," he returned. "Some day I must tell you about them."

"My time in Serbia seems to have cast an heroic halo

about me," she went on. "I am supposed to be resting, recuperating, but incidentally I am becoming quite a personage at war-time entertainments. You met me at the Dealtrys' a week ago, and yesterday I was at the Lorimers."

"Lorimer. Oh, yes, I remember Miss Lorimer, a tall thin woman with knobbly hips who goes about the world trying to find out how the other people in it are misbehaving themselves."

"That is a little hard, perhaps, but there is some truth in it. Yesterday Anthony Ockenden's death was talked about."

"Naturally."

"So were you."

"The same old, time-worn stories, I suppose, and I am willing to wager you took up the cudgels on my behalf."

"The suggestions went further than usual, Dr. Oliver. Someone said that John Scrivener had died immediately after dining at the Dealtrys'. Did he?"

"I believe he did," Oliver answered.

"Somebody else remarked on the coincidence that Scrivener had consulted you only a day or two before his death, that Ockenden lunched with you on the day of his death, and that you were present at the Dealtrys' on both occasions."

"Miss Lorimer must have enjoyed herself thoroughly," Oliver remarked.

"The suggestions did not come from her," said Nurse Houghton. "They were of the 'I hear,' and 'Is it true' order, so difficult to pin down. People who were at the Dealtrys' must have talked. It was the general opinion that your behavior was curious the other night, and that, had you chosen to do so, you could have given more useful information at the inquest."

"Did I behave curiously?"

"I am bound to say yes. You were not a bit yourself all the evening. Frankly, I think I know why."

"Enlighten me, Little Mother."

"I thought that woman, Madame Bocara, had bewitched you."

"I admit she interested me. I think she must have interested everyone there."

"One thing is quite certain, Dr. Oliver. Insinuations are being made that you cannot ignore. You cannot afford to treat them with your don't-care-a-damn attitude. Forgive the expression, but you have got to understand the seriousness of the position."

"I do not see what I can do unless someone definitely accuses me of having caused the death of Scrivener or Ockenden, or both of them."

"You must take the trouble of seizing upon someone who has been busy repeating these tales and then go for him, or her, for all you are worth. Yes, I honestly believe the position is as serious as that."

"There is another side to the question," Oliver said after a thoughtful pause. "I may not want to say anything."

"I have thought of that," she answered. "No, not accusing you, only just wondering."

"When doubts trouble you, it is not remarkable that the people who resent me are inclined to talk, is it?" he said with a smile. "Scrivener had consulted me, and I had advised complete rest from public life for a time. He died, I believe, from the sudden failure of a weak heart. I had warned him of the danger of overwork and excitement. You know, probably as well as I do, that Ockenden's death has yet to be explained. We know now that his mode of life had undermined his constitution, but that does not

account for his sudden and strange collapse, at least I cannot think so. I have a reason for saying no more than I have. It may be a fantastic reason, I do not know, but for the present people must say what they like. They may say worse things about me before I am through with this business."

"Why?"

"I cannot explain yet, Little Mother, but you shall know, and then you must do your best to defend me against my enemies. You will understand, I think, but I am very doubtful about the rest of the world."

"I am never likely to judge you by the world's standard, I have been too near the fighting line to judge any man that way."

She got up, and as Oliver crossed the hall with her, he paused. An idea, dominant perhaps for days past, suddenly took life and definite shape.

"Are you taking private cases now, or are you going out again?" he asked.

"I shall probably go out again, but I do not feel equal to such strenuous work at present. After this week I am open to take cases."

"I am glad. I might want you. Will you promise me something, Little Mother? Should you be called to a case in the immediate future will you take it only on condition that a substitute must be found at once if I require your services? We will settle it now. You are engaged to nurse for me, but you do not know exactly when I shall want you."

"Very well," she answered.

"And don't you worry about me, Little Mother. I am neither fool nor villain, but just a man reaching out towards something I do not understand, reaching out perhaps to take that which the world would withhold from

me if it could. There is battle raging in my soul, Little Mother, and I cannot tell yet how it goes."

"Be true to your ideals and it will go well."

"Perhaps, but the world is a hard school for those who strive after ideals."

For a little while after Nurse Houghton had gone, Oliver paced his room thoughtfully, wondering why he had made so definite a plan for such a doubtful contingency. Then he allowed his mind to slip into the pleasure of anticipation. He was dining at Lantern House tonight. He would see Estelle again.

CHAPTER V

"She is a woman asleep. I am a man content to wait until she wakes."

1

BRUCE OLIVER was the only guest at Lantern House that night, and dinner was served at a small round table in a corner of the large dining room. Silent and soft-footed Indian servants waited on them, everything was perfectly ordered. The Professor was cordial, his wife wholly natural, self-possessed, brilliant. There was no bizarre touch of the East about her as there had been that night at the Dealtrys'. She was out of keeping with her surroundings, with her husband, and again Oliver was impressed by Bocara's subservience to his wife. She led the conversation, and Bocara watched her, not with any look of suspicion but as though it were the very joy of his life to watch her. So might a dog regard its mistress. Once for a moment the close scrutiny seemed to astonish her, but the next instant she was laughing as only a happy woman can.

To Oliver there was something unnatural in the situation. He could not think of himself as an ordinary visitor, he had no place there on a familiar footing. There should be something cataclystic in his intercourse with Estelle Bocara, otherwise it sank to the low level of intrigue.

When she at last rose from the table she reminded them that she was alone tonight. They must not be long in joining her.

"Only a few moments, Estelle," said her husband, as Oliver opened the door for her. She passed out without looking at him.

"A cigarette, Doctor?"

"Shall you mind if I smoke one of my own? I like them mild."

"Not at all. Mine are especially made for me and are perhaps a little strong. I smoke too many of them I fear. Sometimes Madame reproves me. You admire my wife, Dr. Oliver."

The words came slowly and deliberately. They were not a question, but a statement of fact, and Oliver's square jaw set a little more firmly. He had exercised careful control over himself during dinner, but it was evident the penetrating eyes which looked steadily into his had spied out something of his secret. Oliver was on his guard. With his wife's departure Bocara's manner had changed; some restraining force seemed to have been removed suddenly.

"I think anyone would find it extremely difficult not to admire her," Oliver said, taking longer than was necessary to light his cigarette. "I can only be one amongst a great many."

"Of course—a great many. She is a beautiful woman, yes, and sometimes a little peculiar. It is necessary to understand her. I have perfect understanding, but for

others it is difficult. They may most easily misinterpret her meaning sometimes."

"I think, Professor——"

"Ah, not for a moment do I suppose that you could do so," was the quick answer, although he seemed to feel for the right word to express his meaning. "Do not mistake me. You have studied men and women closely, you have written about hysteria, and you know the many and various forms it may take; naturally you would notice many things which others would not observe. If—if you should see much of my wife, you will discover little strangenesses —how shall I name them?—detachments, moments, even periods of time when she appears to lose touch with her surroundings, when she may speak strangely and do unexpected things."

"I have known such cases," Oliver returned.

"Ah, yes, but I want to show you why my wife's is a case apart. I said the other day that people marvelled why I should be her husband. I let them wonder, but to you I would explain."

"Why make an exception of me? I am almost a stranger," Oliver said, challenging his host's attitude, and instinctively shrinking from such a confidence.

"First because you are a doctor. Then, you are not really a stranger since we have so much in common—perhaps we do not yet know how much. And then because I have seen your interest in Estelle, which you would hide but cannot, which sets you apart from the many who admire her. You see there are many reasons why I explain to you."

There was not a trace of maliciousness in his voice, and Oliver was doubtful what interpretation to put upon his words. He shrank from any confidence, and yet he was very anxious to know something of Estelle's history.

"I am interested," he said, "very interested, but ought we to keep Madame Boara waiting?"

"It must be told," said the Professor very definitely.

"Then there is time for another cigarette," Oliver returned carelessly.

2

"I must make you understand the position at the outset," Bocara began. "I spoke of myself a little the other day, when I perceived that, like myself, you were not quite a normal man."

"Pardon me, but I claim to be quite normal."

Bocara smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"A traveller, one ever curious and ever ready to learn, the East and West mingled in him—such am I. Some things I have studied deeply, of others I have but skimmed the surface. I both teach and learn. It is necessary you have a clear conception of me or you cannot comprehend my position."

He paused to knock the ash from his cigarette into a silver dish on the table at his side.

"I was travelling in India, Dr. Oliver, and by chance came to my wife's home in a fortunate hour. Her father was an Englishman, named Savory; her mother of mixed nationality, French predominant. This Savory was some sort of missionary. I do not speak contemptuously, but you seem to have so many religions in England, nearly the same and yet different, that they confuse me. I do not know exactly what he taught, but I judge he was a man of wide mind, willing to learn something from those he endeavored to teach. From what I heard it appeared that he was well liked, and this made the affair inexplicable. You see, Doctor, I did not know Savory."

"You never saw him?"

"Yes, yes, I saw him. Let me explain a little. He was in Northern India, amongst the foothills of the Himalayas, out of the beaten track, amongst a people little known but not dangerous. I gathered evidence that he had much endeared himself to this people, and his wife who had a knowledge of medicine, had skilfully used her knowledge so that both of them were looked up to with a kind of reverence. This was the position, and it is not certain what the man did to forfeit it. In some manner he managed to desecrate a particularly sacred idol, whether by word or deed I cannot say, but I think it must have been by deed. Possibly he may have been a fanatic in this particular case, but I think it more likely that he acted in ignorance. The thing was done, however, and religious forces were let loose. You would probably call it superstition, you will forgive me for not thinking quite the same, and for using the word religious. In the dusk of a coming night stealthy men crept to the station and murdered both Savory and his wife. I saw them afterwards, but will not describe. Their daughter was a witness of their deaths before she was knocked on the head. She would have shared her parents' fate undoubtedly had not my party arrived in time."

"How awful!" Oliver exclaimed.

"Estelle was then twelve years of age," Bocara went on, "old enough to fully appreciate the tragedy. It was pitiable to see how the memory of that night remained with her. It showed in every look, in everything she did. You may understand how difficult was my position. She had no one belonging to her, and she clung to me. I was her deliverer from a horrible death, it was natural she should hold to me."

"Could she tell you of no friends?"

"She had never known any. Her parents had lived in complete isolation. Estelle was born in India, and the many enquiries I have made at various times in England and France have failed to discover anyone who knows anything about her. In those days I felt quite unequal to having a child upon my hands, so I tried very hard indeed to find some relation who would look after her. The time came, Doctor, when I rejoiced that I had failed."

Oliver understood, but found it impossible to say so, or to show any sympathy. The man looking at him through a blue haze of smoke ought to have nothing to do with Estelle.

"I did my best," said Bocara. "A duty had been thrust upon me and I made a sacrifice. I ceased to travel."

"You could have sent her to school."

"No. You do not quite understand, Doctor. I have said the child clung to me, but that does not really express her attitude. She was afraid if I went out of her sight, to have sent her away from me would have killed her, I think, or worse, driven her mad. She was taught, partly by me, partly by others. In education, at least, she has not been harmed by not going to school. In other ways, it is true, she did not develop quite normally, but can I be held responsible for that?"

"You should have sent her to Europe," said Oliver.

"Why? By all that is holy, why?" and for a moment there was fierce energy and opposition in Bocara as he asked the question. "As a reasonable man can you claim for the West any superior righteousness or wisdom in the face of what is happening in Europe today?"

"Perhaps not," Oliver admitted. "I was thinking conventionally."

"Being of the East it was natural I should choose an Eastern development for her. She was born in India,

remember. You must keep that in your mind if you would understand. Gradually, very gradually, the memory of her parents' tragedy became less vivid—but no, that is not quite true, perhaps it is more correct to say that her attitude towards the tragedy slowly changed. She was no longer afraid. She seemed, in some strange way, to appreciate the ideals which had influenced her father, and yet was able to understand the attitude of his murderers, and could think of them without anger. There was no thought of revenge in her. There came a conviction that truth and error had been mingled, had reached a point where they clashed, and an absorbing desire took possession of her to show the real truth to all men who were dwelling in ignorance of truth, or with a false idea of truth. I wonder if you follow me, Doctor?"

"I think so. I presume you fostered this attitude in her?"

"Rather I stood aside," Bocara answered. "I did not interfere, my beliefs would not allow it. You may call me superstitious, but what you call superstition I call religion. Besides, there was no need to foster Estelle's attitude of mind. She speedily went far beyond me. What I was groping after she had grasped. The native priests and philosophers quickly realized this, and to them she became a sort of personification of Eastern thought, a curiously complex personality. At times she was just a normal girl, full of vivacity and laughter; at other times she was silent, detached, holding communion with that which is outside our knowledge. And so it is today."

"It is difficult to understand," said Oliver.

"That is wisely said, humbly said, most doctors would grow learned on mental aberrations and forms of hysteria. I think you must appreciate my position and my difficulty. Estelle was very dear to me. She was Eastern in thought

as I was, although her beauty was Western, and in many ways her manner was Western, too. I was the only person she had in all the world to turn to. I know your customs and conventions. Some day prejudice will vanish, but at present such a man as I am is hardly placed. Here you do not like, you only tolerate him, and in his own land he is distrusted. You would keep him in his place, and under no circumstances must he raise his eyes to your women. Estelle was not one of your women, she belonged to the country of her adoption. And just because of this, and because she was beautiful, she drew men's eyes, even the eyes of princes. She cared for no man. She knew no love. She had been my child, she became a beautiful woman who was with me always. It was very difficult, Doctor, and I put the position before her. I was quite honest. Mine was the only kind of love she knew or wished for. She became my wife."

"How long ago?" Oliver asked.

"Seven years. She was eighteen then."

Oliver's thoughts flew back seven years, trying to realize and understand his own life seven years ago. There should have come a crisis into it then, some event to parallel the crisis in this woman's life.

"Since then we have travelled much," Bocara went on, "in India, in China, Japan and Europe. We know Vienna, Rome, Berlin, Paris. We were in Paris at the outbreak of the war, and afterwards came to London. I had good introductions, my credentials are excellent. I am an Oriental scholar, and Estelle has been able to make many friends. Some people have held aloof because of me, but mostly her charm has conquered opposition. For those who sneered at me she cared nothing. In all these seven years she has had no regret. Her Western people have not been able to take her from me."

The keen penetrating eyes regarded Oliver steadily, and there was a curious note of pleading in Bocara's voice, almost a confession of unworthiness.

"You are testing her, is that what you mean?"

"Perhaps."

"I think I understand," said Oliver, who had an unpleasant feeling that a direct appeal was being made to him.

"Do you? I wonder. I am trying to change places with you, Doctor, and see if I should understand. It cannot be very easy, but I will be very definite. In marrying me Estelle gained the love of a man dedicated to books, to study, to thought, to learning; a man not passionless but full of purpose and concentration, a man capable of sacrifice and self-suppression—a friend. A woman, just because she is a woman, has never meant anything to me. I do not explain, I only mention a fact. Estelle came and touched chords in me which had never been set vibrating before. She was a woman apart, wanting not love as other women do. Presently it will be different. She is my very dear companion, nothing more, always was—and is."

"Why tell me all this?" Oliver asked curtly, resenting a confidence which forced him into a false position.

"Have I not said already?" Bocara returned. "You are a doctor, and since you remain unmarried, and are a student and thinker, I imagine you are something like myself as regards women. Unless I tell you about my wife it is not possible you can understand her, and I would not have you misjudge her in any way. She is a woman asleep. I am a man content to wait until she wakes."

Once more their eyes met across the table. If there had been a note of appeal in the Professor's voice, it was out of it now; instead, there was a veiled threat which aroused in Bruce Oliver renewed antagonism against this man.

Was Estelle Bocara a woman asleep? At least she was stirring in her sleep, might be at the very point of waking. If on wakening she should look into Bocara's eyes and see, as Oliver saw, all that was meant by the fire in them, what would the waking be to her? Surely it would bring her to the threshold of madness.

"I quite understand," said Oliver, throwing the dead end of his cigarette into the silver ash tray.

"Then we will go and enjoy Estelle's music," said Bocara, rising from the table with a smile as though their conversation had been of the most casual after-dinner kind.

3

From the depths of an Eastern lounge of soft cushions, Estelle turned towards the two men as they entered. She turned slowly, lazily, and made no attempt to rise. Their entrance might have disturbed her from sleep. Her attitude emphasized all that was Eastern in her, and repelled Bruce Oliver. His conversation with Bocara, the suggestion of rivalry, served to taint the atmosphere, seemed to change an essence which had divine perfume in it to a heavy languorous scene redolent of passion. The woman's attitude accentuated the position.

"You have been a long time," she said, looking at Oliver.

"We have become better acquainted," Bocara remarked carelessly.

"Have you talked of me?" she asked, still looking at Oliver.

"Is there nothing else we should talk about?" asked her husband, laughing. "Are women enough to fill the whole lives of men who are neither vain nor empty headed?"

She paid no attention to him, she waited for Oliver's answer, and it seemed to him that she must be aware of

their conversation, perhaps expected him to speak intimately of what he had been told.

"Yes, we have talked of you," he said, "and now we have disturbed you from sleep, I believe."

"From dreams, not from sleep."

Was she any longer asleep in the sense that Bocara had indicated? Some meaning seemed to lie under her words as if she already knew of the fires within ready to burst into flame.

"Play to us, Estelle," Bocara said.

"Are you fond of music, Dr. Oliver?" she asked.

"Is it not the universal language?" said Bocara, "wherein all may understand something of those whose who are alien to them in speech. At the opera who cares what tongue is used? Only the music counts. Do you remember in Paris, Estelle?—Tristan? The great duet, part of it—play that."

"No, I do not play it," she said, slipping from the lounge, to avoid taking her husband's hand to help her up it seemed to Oliver.

"But I have heard you play it."

"Never since that night," she said, as if something which had happened then were the reason. "I play, Dr. Oliver, in my own fashion, and seldom what I am asked to play. To ask me for this or that is to make a machine of me, a box of tricks, a piano player. Music must be myself of the moment, as I feel, the speech of me which I cannot put into words. That is music, the universal language of which my husband speaks."

She went to the piano which stood open, and for a few moments sat with her hands folded in her lap. Then she struck a few plaintive chords which passed slowly into a melody which breathed of the East, love in it, passion, perhaps despair. With barely a pause between she passed to

a movement in a Beethoven sonata, then into some of the Parsival music, and then into the weird strains of some Russian or Hungarian dance. Presently Oliver felt sure she was extemporising, and if it were a reflection of her soul, strange tumult must be there, yet a melody persisted, sad but with possibilities of joy, a promise for the future.

She ceased as abruptly as she had begun. Conventional thanks were impossible.

"I have played since childhood," she said, "but not quite as others. I do not remember learning. In Vienna I went to a great master. Had I been just an ordinary woman he would have sent me away. He asked me some questions, and he perceived that, from his point of view, I should do him little credit as a pupil. I smiled and said I would show him what music meant to me, and he listened. He did not laugh because I broke all the rules of harmony. He did not understand but he wanted to. He was a great man. I remember he said there were no rules for perfection, and he would not undertake to teach me anything, but would show me one or two things. To teach me would be to spoil me, to rob of something I possessed, that is what he said. So you see, Dr. Oliver, you must not compare me with a great pianist. I cannot interpret. It is not what the composer meant, but how he makes me think, that is what I play."

"And I enjoy it although it is beyond me," said Bo-
vara. "I wish we could have had some of the Tristan duet. It was wonderfully sung in Paris that night. I hate most things German, but their music—that has not been beaten."

"Music must make you think, or it is of small value," Estelle went on. "To enjoy is something but it is not enough. Music should produce something in you, color your vision, have result. No art is worth anything with-

out that. If you read a book, and it does not raise thoughts in you, your own thoughts not the author's, then the book fails so far as you are concerned. It is the suggestive in art which is the reality of art, else you could have no better art than a correct photograph. Look at that," and she pointed to an exquisite piece of tapestry on the wall, "there is no picture, only a design, intricate threads of color crossing and recrossing one another. Is that all there is in it? No. Like the threads, the artist's thoughts ran hither and thither, meaning something, until the design was complete. I have not the key to his meaning, but it has a meaning for me. Shall I tell you? There is a blue thread, so plain at first that it seems to give the hue of blue to all the colors around it; gradually it fails, it is still there but with difficulty, it looks as if it would end, as if it must be overwhelmed by the riot of color about it. You almost lose it, yet it persists, and at the end of it is beginning to color everything with blue again. To me it stands for truth persisting through all the gorgeous errors which man has fashioned, and now, today, it begins to prevail and presently shall color everything as from the first it was meant to do."

"And Dr. Oliver sees only a piece of rather expensive tapestry," said Bocara with a smile.

"Science usually works in spectacles," Oliver answered, "but Madame makes me take mine off. When my eyes adjust their focus I think I shall see clearly, as I think I understand the language of her music."

"Ah, for me it is easy to understand," said Bocara. "Estelle and I have lived in the same world, you are a stranger in it, Dr. Oliver."

Estelle, who had remained seated at the piano, got up and returned to the lounge, sinking down in the cushions as if her exertions had exhausted her. Conversation lan-

guished and soon afterwards Oliver rose to go. He thought she was glad for him to go, possibly she was sufficiently sensative to feel the antagonism which existed between him and her husband. Oliver thanked them both for a pleasant evening, but nothing was said of any future visit. Estelle came to the door of the room, but no further; Bocara saw him to the front door. It was a conventional ending to an unconventional evening.

"Shall we study together tonight?" Bocara asked as he returned to his wife.

"Not tonight," she answered. She did not plead fatigue, but she was very definite.

Bocara watched her as she crossed the hall and went up the three steps to the corridor. From the balcony she turned and looked down at him. He bowed to her, but she neither smiled nor spoke. Usually he received a smiling good-night.

"She is waking," he said as he went to his study. "She is waking fast. Powers Almighty grant my petition. I have watched over her sleeping, honor me with her favor when she fully wakes."

4

Far into the early hours of morning Bruce Oliver sat in his study, thinking, mentally reaching forward in an endeavor to grasp something definite. The practical man in him was struggling against the dreamer. He had called himself a hard, practical man, that was his attitude to the world at large, few recognized that there was anything of the dreamer in him. He knew it himself, and sometimes considered it a weakness, yet had found relief in it, a help to perfect sanity. Since meeting Estelle Bocara the dreamer had developed dangerously. Away from her,

reason had possession of him; even in her presence, when her real personality lay dormant, hidden in an ordinary woman, he could reason with himself and facts; but when her influence was exercised he was plunged into a fantastic atmosphere and compelled to conclusions which his reason refused to admit. The East was full of imagination and dreams, the West had science, could prove its arguments, could laugh at childish beliefs. This was deliberate reasoning, yet he found no satisfaction in any conclusion.

Tonight he had heard Estelle's story, Bocara's version of it, true in fact, no doubt, but necessarily incomplete. Bocara had attempted to describe Estelle's mental attitude, her own description would certainly differ in many details. It was quite evident from Bocara's treatment of her that he did not wholly understand her complex nature. The story filled Oliver's mind tonight. There were points in it which fitted in with a wild theory which had been in his brain night and day since he had first met her, a theory opposed to all reason yet refusing to be ignored. Were there not truths beyond all reason? Was there not reality in imagination? Bruce Oliver thus agreed with the dreamer in him, and then with the practical man he scoffed. His theory might lead him to a more ordinary conclusion than the one the dreamer in him contemplated. It was a conclusion, a possibility he shirked. He had refused to face it, tonight it became insistent. It was in his power to put theory to the test.

He put on an old jacket, and taking the key from his pocket, crossed to the door in the panelling. The dawn was not far off, but this time Oliver did not turn away. He opened the door and went slowly down the half dozen steps which led to his laboratory.

CHAPTER VI

It is not easy to talk of evil to an innocent soul.

1

THE AFTERNOON shadows were beginning to lengthen across the lawn, the house was very still, and Estelle Bo-cara sat motionless in a low chair by the open window. Nearly a fortnight had passed since Bruce Oliver had dined there, and during that time she had not met him anywhere. She had been to three or four entertainments, entertainments to raise money for some war purpose and incidentally to keep up social intercourse, and always she had glanced round expectantly. When she found that Bruce Oliver was not there she was not disappointed, she knew she would see him in due time. Perhaps he would come to Lantern House when she was alone. At their next meeting they would probably be alone together, they never had been yet, and they had so much to say to each other. He might come this afternoon, but she had no definite wish that he should do so, no hope that could suffer keen disappointment, and it had never entered her head to send for him or arrange a meeting.

Twice her husband had accompanied her to entertainments, and on other occasions he had asked her whom she had met. Had she seen his friend Dr. Oliver? The question did not trouble her, she was not conscious of any suspicion in it. Only those who have something to conceal can fear suspicion, and she had nothing to hide.

This mental detachment, sometimes complete when she was alone, was never so in company, nor when she was with her husband. While she waited for the great event which must presently come, as surely as dawn after dark, an event of which she had no certain knowledge, only conviction that it must carry her forward along a path hitherto untrodden, which would lead her whither she knew not, but certainly towards good and her destined place in life's scheme, she was not careless of the everyday events. Everything was of importance. The sum of small happenings counted for much in the world's balance. She was conscious of herself, of her beauty, her attraction. It pleased her to be satisfied with the reflection in her mirror, a word from her husband endorsing her own opinion of herself was pleasant. She was content with the fact of her beauty, there was no thrill in the knowledge. She liked a man's companionship if he talked well, if he were clever like her husband, but she had no other interest in him whatever. Homage of the kind she received from her husband was right and natural. They were always together, studied together, were linked in friendship and thought. She had expected no more and no less from him. Once, and only once had he acted differently towards her, that night in Paris after they had heard Tristan. The music seemed to have intoxicated him, gone to his brain like heady wine, but he had quickly become sober again. It had been a shock to Estelle, so great indeed that she had never played the music since. She wondered that he had asked for it the night Bruce Oliver had dined with them. The request had made her angry and afterwards a little speculative. Her husband's proximity always had an energizing effect upon her, sometimes almost distressing her physical powers, sometimes reviving her like a draught of spring water after thirst, but always touching an an-

swering chord in herself; since the coming of Bruce Oliver she had been conscious of not responding to her husband with the same harmony. She had been impelled to set her will against his, not constantly but on occasion. She had had Karac in the house against her husband's will and found a strange consolation in the dog's presence; she had given the amulet to Dr. Oliver against her husband's will and found great content; she had refused to study on two or three occasions when he had been inclined to insist. These things gave her no real anxiety, led to no sustained and anxious thought, because she had not yet full understanding. She was not a woman asleep as Bocara had called her, she was awake, and like a child new-born into a strange world was awaiting tuition and explanation.

Possibly the old gardener, pottering amongst the flower beds, wondered why she did not come out to him as usual, for she loved her garden. She was not in the mood to be interested in it today, something wider, more profound, had hold of her even in her detachment and presently stirred her to action. The house, the garden, were too narrow for the mental energy within her, she wanted space and far horizons, the high point of a moorland, or a headland overhanging a wide stretch of bounding ocean. None of these was at hand, but there was Richmond Park; and a few minutes later, with Karac for company, she was going towards a secluded seat in a wood on high ground, where she often went to fill her lungs with the crisp air of morning, or to dream away a sultry, slumbrous afternoon.

2

Estelle took off her hat, letting the breeze fan her cheeks and ruffle her hair. Karac lay at her feet, his head resting on his outstretched paws. The solitude was not as complete today as usual. A horseman passed along the

edge of the wood, and soon afterwards a blue-clad wounded soldier and a woman went slowly through the bracken, lovers, bending close to each other, unconscious of watching eyes, with no thought for the rest of the world. From the hidden road below came the sound of a motor, the sound of its purring engine dying slowly into silence in the distance. Far above in the sunlit blue was the hum of an aeroplane. Then there was another motor on the road, drawing nearer and stopping suddenly. Estelle saw and heard, but neither sight nor sound disturbed her reverie. The dog raised his head, looking at his mistress, and after an uncertain pause got up. There were rapid footsteps coming through the bracken, then silence.

"You have come," she said; slowly raising her eyes to the man who stood beside her.

"Did you know I should come?" said Oliver, laying his hand in a caress on the dog's head. Karac did not growl, he was perfectly satisfied with this intruder and lay down again.

"Sooner or later I knew you must come," she answered.
"How did you find me?"

"Once before I have been here but I did not recognize the place until I saw you. It was in the early morning of the day I met you at the Dealtrys', but I did not realize it was you then, I did not know until the night I dined at Lantern House. I had come from Richmond, wanting a walk and fresh air after a night spent in the hospital there. It was here I first saw you, the morning sun on you. You were in white just as you are now. I saw you and stopped. I dared not come closer for this place seemed to be your sanctuary."

"It is strange I did not know you were near me," she said. "And today?"

"God knows," and Oliver spoke reverently. "I have not

been in Richmond Park since that morning, but I had to come today, and at this hour. I tried not to come. I looked up to this wood, not recognizing the place, but I stopped the car. I had to come. I saw no path; I came through the bracken and—and I find you."

"I am glad. I felt lonely like—like a child in a dark room."

She turned to him as he seated himself beside her, looking into his eyes, hers as innocent as a young girl's, his not so steady as usual. Some apology for coming had seemed necessary, he was conscious of giving it incoherently, and the fact that she accepted the situation as wholly usual confused him a little.

"Tell me of yourself, your life," he said. "We have said so little to each other. We have never been alone until this moment."

"My life. You see something strange in it?"

"Something wonderful," he answered.

"It is a little difficult to tell. I want you to know everything of course, but part of my life, even as I live it today is—how shall I explain?—it is as if it were in a foreign language, a language of which I have very imperfect knowledge, in which I am only in the stage of translating sentences. Do you think you know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"Once when I was a child something happened. I am not very clear about it. My father and mother were killed horribly, and I saw them die. I suppose that is why it hurts me to talk of death. I have tried to remember more about my father and mother, but when I do I always walk into a cloud, a mist, peopled with images which compel my attention. In it there was always the face of one man, and presently out of it, too,—my husband."

She paused and laid her hand on his arm for a moment.

then withdrew it. Oliver's hands, strained together, were clasped between his knees.

"He wasn't my husband then. I was only a child. Gradually I began a new life, and the memory of the old one became less and less distinct. I think I forgot all I had learned in it except my music, that remained and grew. Now I learned many things from men and women and from books. They were my school days, but not like the schooldays of other children. I learned a great deal, and curiously I learned many things which no one seemed to teach me. Perhaps the images in the cloud were my instructors."

"What kind of knowledge?" Oliver asked.

"About life, about good and evil, about the high gods," she answered. "I could never explain it in words. I tried to do so to the Professor. He was one of my teachers. I think you can hardly know how deep his knowledge is. Without him I should not have lived. I should have been in the cloud always, an image in it and no more. He took care of me, I was his child. So I grew up, of the East by adoption. I became a woman, and men said I was beautiful. Some said I was wise because of the knowledge I had which no one had taught me, and there were priests desirous of dedicating me to some great purpose. But no, it was decided that I must marry. I think there were many who wanted to marry me, and all I desired was to be as I had always been. The Professor understood, and he married me so that I might remain his child."

"And are you happy?"

"Of course. Nothing was changed. We were still together as we had always been. We studied together, we—"

"What do you study with Professor Bocara?" Oliver asked.

"Once, many things and languages, now it is only the way of life, the world's pilgrimage towards the future. Do you remember the other night, the blue thread in the tapestry; it is things like that we study, and we teach each other In some ways I can see further than the Professor. Just lately we have not studied."

"Why not?"

"Because I have stepped on to another plane, because I am being born into a new life which is beyond anything I can learn from the Professor. He has no part in it. I cannot tell you why. It is strange when he has always meant so much to me. I should like to feel sorry, but I cannot. It is as if I had passed from one great chamber fully lighted into another, lighted but dim to my unaccustomed eyes. I close the door between them and hear the Professor trying to open it, trying to follow me. I do not open the door. I feel his presence, but I rejoice that the door is shut. Perhaps you can understand why I felt so lonely today."

"And unhappy?" he asked.

"No, but it is a new kind of happiness which comes to me. As yet I cannot tell how happy I shall be, I am waiting to learn. Only this I know, it will be happiness if it is full of pain."

"Estelle!"

"Then you do know why I am glad you came?" she said, again putting her hand on his arm. This time he put his hand upon hers and held it there. "It sounds strange, my name; no one has ever spoken it as you do."

"I ought not to call you Estelle, but—"

"But yes, it is right," she said quickly. "I have been waiting. You must know I have been waiting."

"Child, do you know what you are saying, what you are doing?"

"Beginning to live. I have been asleep, dreaming only. I did not realize it, only partly, until now, until this moment when you called me Estelle and woke me."

"Tell me," said Oliver. He wanted time to think, to take hold of himself if that were possible, to make decision.

"It is not quite easy to tell you because it is soul knowledge, easier to think of than to put into words. It is like great prayer, even if you use words they do not say all your thoughts mean, do not tell all that is in your heart. It is not possible, words were not meant for such work. Never in words do the high gods make answer. How shall I make you understand? I have been quite contented, desiring no change. I liked travel, meeting people, studying them. Of course I knew I was not like other women, I did not want to be. They had children. I had only a husband who was quite different from their husbands. I was happy, it seemed to me a better kind of happiness than theirs. I had no contempt for their happiness, their love, only it had no meaning for me. I should hate any man I have ever seen to touch me, to caress me, kiss me. It would be horrible—wicked. I should have killed any man who tried to do anything like that. And yet, always I have known that some day it would be quite different, that something would happen and I should awake. Now the hour has come, and I am waiting to understand all it means to me, waiting as brooding darkness waits for the sun at dawn, waiting as parched ground waits for the freshening shower."

"You are sure? How can you be sure?"

"My soul stirred when I first saw you," she answered. "I have looked into your eyes. I know that a new life begins for me, for us, from this hour. Don't you?"

Oliver stood up quickly, suddenly, almost as if he were

startled and afraid. She rose too and stood close beside him, careless of the hat and gloves which fell from her lap to the ground.

"Don't you?" she whispered.

"Estelle! Estelle! Hate me, kill me if you will. At least for one precious moment I shall have lived."

She was in his arms, strained close to him, his lips pressed to hers. There was no horseman at the edge of the wood, no lovers going slowly through the bracken, no sound from the road below. They were alone, and this was not earth but paradise.

"I am awake," she sighed. "At last I am awake, a real woman knowing love. And there is so much to learn. Teach me, Bruce, teach me."

8

The doctor's chauffeur grew accustomed to waiting long hours for his master in Richmond Park. Three or four afternoons a week he drove there, stopping always at the same spot.

In the glow of love, in the sunlight of these halcyon afternoons, Bruce Oliver was forgetful of all else, and thought little of the strangeness of his wooing. How should a man think of such things when for the first time in his life a woman's kisses were warm upon his lips and his very soul thrilled at her touch. But away from her the burden of responsibility weighed heavily upon him at times. He was treading on forbidden ground and was alive to the difficulties which must presently be faced. For himself he had no thought, only Estelle mattered, and she seemed utterly oblivious to any strangeness in their intercourse. *It was wholly right, the most natural thing in the world to her. He must try and explain the position to her, but*

he had little hope she would understand it. He doubted if he really understood it himself. She was his, not through overmastering passion, but by right of love. He had not tempted her, he had spread no snares in her path. He had said no word of love to her until love was with them suddenly, not to be denied, not to be considered a crime. Still, he must make her understand what such love involved. It would be difficult, in many ways she was such a child. It is not easy to talk of evil to an innocent soul.

And then one afternoon she helped him.

"We were dining with some people called Falconer last night, the Professor and I. You told me to go out as usual although I hate going."

"What did you wear?" he asked.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Is it wonderful I should like to know how you looked when I was not there to see you?"

"It is delicious," she said with a happy laugh. "I was really with you all the time, in that house of yours which I have never yet entered. I thought of you when I dressed, and put on what I knew you would like, just as if I were going to see you."

She told him what she wore, her dress, her jewelry, the way she had done her hair. There could have been nothing of Oriental splendor about her, and Oliver was glad. He hated that barbaric note, it linked her with Bocara.

"I looked very nice," she said, slipping her arm through his. "And they were talking about you, Bruce."

"Who did?"

"I forget who started it. I think it was some man I did not know. He said you were a strange individual and seldom told all you knew. Someone who didn't know you at all was talking to me at the time so I could not catch all

that was said. I think the conversation was about Mr. Ockenden and a Member of Parliament called Scrivener. I met him once or twice and did not like him."

"You don't remember anything else they said about me?"

"No. If you like I could ask the Professor. I heard him say you were a great friend of his, and I think he spoke as if he did not agree with what they were saying. I should like to have told them what kind of man you really were, Bruce."

"You darling. Do you imagine anyone would recognize me from your description?"

"Perhaps not, but then I know, and nobody else in the world does. Philippa Dealtry was there, and Bruce, I wondered if she knew anything about us, this wood, our love."

"Why, dear?"

"I don't know, the idea came into my head. She asked whether I had seen you, and when I told her you had dined with us once, she asked me whether I liked you. She was persistent. If she were not going to marry that lame Mr. Palgrave, I could almost have thought she was jealous of me. I said yes, just in that tone of voice, and shrugged my shoulders so, and I believe she thought I did not do you justice. Ah, Bruce, could she only have looked into my heart."

Oliver was silent for a few moments, inclined to shirk the opportunity now it had come.

"Presently they must know," he said after a pause.

"Of course. It is just when you choose, Bruce."

"Do you quite realize what we are doing, dear?"

"Yes, beginning to live, and all the joyous future is before us. I am just waiting for you to tell me what I must do."

"There is the world to be faced. The world calls what we are doing a sin."

"But the world knows nothing about it," she answered lightly, and then, influenced by his gravity perhaps, she went on more seriously. "To find love, how can that be a sin? To fling one love away for another, yes, that would be sin, but it is not my case, is it—nor yours?"

"Yours was a hateful marriage."

"And it is over," she said definitely.

"In a conventional world things are different," said Oliver. "That world says I have no right to love you because you are another man's wife."

"I have never been of the conventional world, I think, nor want to be if its laws are not based on what is good and true. Besides, it can know nothing of my marriage, nor that my husband was not as other husbands, so how can it presume to judge? No, Bruce, and you must not say it was a hateful marriage. It was for a purpose, that I might remain as I was, that I should not be as other women, that I should come to this time, and you. The Professor has been good to me, a friend, no more. I do not forget that, only now, of course, everything must be different."

"All the people you know will not understand," said Oliver.

"I am sorry, but that is not my fault, is it?"

"And the Professor will not understand either."

"He will miss me," she said quietly, "but he must have known that some day this might happen, that love would come and I should go away."

"Yes, we shall go away," said Oliver as a strong man who decides upon definite action. "Hard things will be said of us but they shall not hurt us."

"I shall not even hear them enough to feel them, because

this thing we do is right. Were it evil I would not do it though all my days should be sorrowful."

"They shall be full of joy," Oliver whispered. "I wish we could go now, this moment, but we must wait a little while. I hate parting with you."

"You will keep me in your thoughts."

"You are always there."

"Then you do not let me go. Thought binds us together, close together, like this," and she kissed him on the lips.

4

Bruce Oliver had made his decision, definitely and deliberately, yet searched his brain for some way out of the difficulty which would not subject Estelle to the gibes of the world. Strong in her own truth and innocence, she might be careless of reproach, but to him it was hateful that so sacred a union as theirs should furnish the world with food for jest and ribaldry. There had been no real marriage with Bocara, and a wild idea came into Oliver's head that he might suggest to the Professor that the marriage should be annulled. The memory of Bocara's attitude on the night he had dined at Lantern House dispelled the idea and made Oliver afraid on Estelle's account. It was impossible to tell what a man like Bocara might do.

Oliver did not speak of his fears to Estelle, nor did he talk any more of the world's attitude to such love as theirs. He talked only of love and of the future. She was so certain of her position, so innocent of a censorious world outside her conception of truth and life, that the ordinary arguments were meaningless to her. Bocara had only married her that she might remain his child. Before and since marriage they had been comrades. She had helped him in

his work, they had studied some of the great problems of good and evil together, sometimes he had sought her advice, but love had not touched her even in passing, had never made her curious. She knew nothing of even the shadow of love. It was no mere pose when she said she would have killed any man who had offered her a caress. Bocara himself would not have been exempt from the penalty at any time during their married life.

They were soon meeting every afternoon in that sanctuary in the woods, staying longer and longer together, ever finding parting more difficult, love growing deeper every hour. There was nothing to wait for, yet Oliver hesitated to take the final and irrevocable step. Hope still lingered at the back of his mind that there must be some way out of the difficulty, some reasonable law which could annul the hateful marriage, a law which Bocara must bow to. And in his brain there also lurked a problem to which long night hours were given, sometimes in his study, often in his laboratory. It brought wild rushes of confused thought, sometimes even when he was with Estelle. A chance word of hers might recall some point in his reading or experiment of last night.

It was so one afternoon just before they parted.

"Estelle," he said, holding her hands firmly in his, speaking in a masterful way. "I want you to answer me a question or two, just as if you were ill and a doctor were questioning you."

"But I am not ill and you are my lover."

"Yes, dear heart, but you must answer me. I want to understand and know you altogether. You have told me that you have sometimes felt like being in a cloud, seeing images in it; that sensation has not passed altogether, has it?"

"No."

"There are occasions now when you go back into the cloud, drift back into it?"

"Yes, but not very lately."

"Can you determine the reason for this going back?"

"No. It just happens."

"And when you are in this mist, this cloud, does life seem unreal, wholly out of your own control?"

"It is not quite like that, Bruce."

"Tell me in your own way, dearest."

"Do you say your prayers, Bruce?" she asked.

"Not as I should do, not in set fashion. I have been lax, dearest."

"I must teach you," she said. "If you had ever lost yourself in prayer, I could explain much better what you are asking me. At the beginning, when I was a child, the cloud was thicker, denser, numbing me mentally, but afterwards, as I grew up, it was thin, like mist, and seemed to be part of my religion. I lost myself in it as in a cloud of incense, and the images in it were like suggestions, dreams and visions which needed interpretation."

"Did you find the interpretation?"

"Sometimes, at least it seemed so. There was nothing very definite. Generally I have felt that I had some purpose in life, that there was something I must do and no other. Life became larger than it was in my every-day world, larger, fuller of meaning, and I felt that for some great purpose I was the chosen instrument. My mental vision grew clearer, I could feel more keenly for all people, for the poor, for the downtrodden, for the sufferers from injustice. I could perceive the hidden sins in nations and in individuals. Then the vision—I know not what else to call it—has passed. I became mostly material after being mostly spiritual."

"Why should it pass? What caused it to pass?"

"Bruce, dear, I cannot say. The mood held me no longer."

"And you were just the same as before, there was no feeling of satisfaction, no sense of accomplishment?"

"Yes, sometimes there was a sensation that something had been accomplished."

"Can you not fix on anything which started these moods?" Oliver asked.

"Sometimes they came after I had been studying with the Professor, not always but sometimes."

"And did you shrink from them?"

"Oh, no. I was elated because through vision I was going to learn more of the great scheme of existence."

There was a note of enthusiasm in the answer and Oliver looked at her keenly.

"Were you in this spirit of elation when you first met me?" he asked.

"I think I was, I am not quite sure. You seem to have been one of the images in my thin cloud, but it is difficult to speak quite certainly. You see, dear, love had come to me."

"But you were or had been quite recently in the cloud?"

"Yes, it was the last occasion. Now I know love perhaps there will never be another."

"And you will regret that?"

"I cannot answer that, Bruce. I do not know."

"Have you been helping the Professor in his work again?"

"This morning," she answered.

"Did any elation come?" he asked, watching her closely.

"No. I did not want to help him, but I have refused so often lately that I did not want to hurt him by refusing again. Today there was no gladness in it, only weariness. Love fills my soul, Bruce, there is no room for anything

else. Soon I want to be near you, Bruce, close to you always."

"Yet there is pity in your heart for the Professor."

"Of course. That is the only reason I studied with him today. Why have you asked me all these questions?"

"Because I am a doctor as well as your lover," he answered, forcing a note of gaiety. "Because the lover in me sees every little ruffle of change in you, and the doctor immediately wonders whether you are quite as well as you should be."

"Foolish, dear lover," she said. "Change! Naturally I am changing, yet really remain the same, just as a bud is really the same as the flower in bloom. Dear love of mine, there is much you have to teach me, and much too that you shall learn from me. I shall teach you to forget the great doctor sometimes and lose yourself with me in my cloud—in prayer. There shall we be close together, body and soul."

They had been together longer than usual this afternoon, and parting was more difficult than ever. Twice Estelle pleaded for a few minutes longer, loath to let him go, and Oliver was tempted to hurry her forthwith to his waiting car and drive her away into some remote hiding place never to let her go again.

"Tomorrow, love, come early tomorrow," he whispered.

"It is so long until tomorrow, Bruce, from now to dark and all the dreary hours of the night."

"Yet we are bound together by thought," he said.

"And shielded by prayer," she murmured, "by prayers burning into the Almighty conscience even as tiny flames, symbols of spirit truths, are sent floating into the unknown on the tide of an Indian river. Bruce, darling, pray tonight. We pray differently perhaps, you and I, and our

petitions travel by different ways, but all prayer comes to the same listening ears."

And with this promise they parted.

5

Estelle was late on the following afternoon. Oliver had waited anxiously for nearly an hour, fearing many things, before she came. And when she came she came slowly. His fears were not dispelled. She was a little different. It might be accounted for by her dress, which was more noticeable Oriental than usual, rich color in it, the Oriental note he hated. There was jade at her throat, and on her wrist a bracelet of jade. Her dress jarred upon him, it linked her with Bocara, with the life from which she was to be freed by love. Oliver knew that she could not have thought of him when she dressed today, and sensitive to her every mood, he imagined there was less warmth in her kiss.

"Dear heart, you are late."

She offered no excuse.

"How soon shall we go away?" she asked. "It must be very soon now."

"Estelle, what has happened?"

"Nothing. Listen, Bruce, long ago, it seems long ago, did I not tell you that had I wings I would fly into the heart of the setting sun—Westwards you understand where dwell happiness and peace. You asked me what the Professor would do, and I said he would still go on teaching his languages."

"I remember, dearest."

"I meant that he would understand, would know that my destiny was being accomplished. I believed that I spoke the simple truth, but now—Bruce, love has given me

a clearer vision of today and of some yesterdays. I have not understood, but knowledge of love has opened my eyes, not suddenly, gradually. I am beginning to see more distinctly in that dim chamber into which I have passed, into which I would not open the door for the Professor to follow me."

"Tell me," said Oliver, compelling the confidence which seemed to waver.

"There was the night in Paris after we had heard Tristan. I felt the presence of evil then, and I would never play that music again, but my understanding stopped short. That night the Professor forgot I was his child and looked upon me as a woman, tried to make me know I was a woman. And since then, there have been other times when he was very subtly different. I have not understood, I have only been conscious of a disinclination to study with him, to be alone with him, and have wanted Karac with me for company."

"Yes, dear, yes, tell me everything."

"There is not much to tell, only my will opposed his in small things. I was a little afraid of something unknown—and yet it was not fear exactly, doubt rather. I do not know fear. It began, this change, from the moment you and I met. Love began at once to unclose my eyes. Doubt was near me when you first came to Lantern House. That is why I gave you the amulet."

"It is here," said Oliver, touching his breast.

"Until then I had always worn it," she went on, "and the Professor resented my parting with it. A priest of an Indian temple gave it to me, a wise old man who walked close to the will of the gods. It would keep me from all harm, he said. It was an emblem of love, and love shields *from all evil*."

"Then you must wear it still, Estelle," and Oliver raised his hand to unfasten the chain about his neck.

"No, no," she said, holding him. "It is to keep you from harm. When you had gone that afternoon the Professor spoke to me in a strange way. Our wills were at war for the first time I think. He looked at me in a way I resented, yet did not understand. I know now. It was the way a man looks at a woman when—when he desires her."

"You must take the amulet," Oliver said, and his persistency was proof of his belief in it.

"Yours is the danger, Bruce," she said more eagerly than she had yet spoken. "I know, but I cannot tell you how I know. If danger is near I can feel it, as a bird scents a coming storm. I should have stopped you coming to dinner that night only I felt danger was far off, and—and I wanted you so. And since then I have been learning. If the Professor touched my hand I shrank. I turned away when he looked at me. I have pitied him because he must be without me, but now—Bruce, I do not want to hate, remembering the past, but I must be near you. It must be soon, Bruce."

"It shall be, dearest."

"And you must not come to Lantern House. Under no circumstances must you come there again. I should be afraid."

"Estelle, you must come with me now, you must not go back there. It is not safe."

"For me, yes. No harm can happen to me."

"The amulet—"

"It is for you to wear. I am quite safe. He dare not hurt me."

"Dare not!" Oliver exclaimed.

"I know I am safe. He fears me because I am in the

special keeping of the high gods. Long ago I was blessed for special service. The priests thought me wise and would have dedicated me a priestess, but the Professor said no. I did not serve in the temple, I was dedicated to work in the world of men and women. The priests did not love the Professor for keeping me his child, and he knows I am in the care of Almighty Power."

"I am afraid, Estelle. I am a coward because of you. Come now."

"It is not possible. Think and arrange for three days, Bruce, and then—"

"Three days!"

"I have not told you, I have had so much to say today. You will not see me for three days."

"Estelle! Why not?"

"I have things to do. I am leaving one life for another, I have much to do."

"I shall be terribly anxious and utterly wretched."

"You shall tell me three days from now, and I shall comfort you, and you shall say when we are to go. It must be soon. Ah, Bruce, the happiness that has love in it always brings pain. It is wonderful that there should be no perfect happiness without pain. I am going now. You shall wait here and watch me go, watch me until the rising ground yonder hides me, and then—in three days."

She would not stay, he could not persuade her. He watched her go, slowly as she had come. She never looked back, not even as she crossed the rising ground. And alone in her sanctuary Oliver prayed for her safety. Almost he threw out his arms in supplication as once he had seen her do.

The only fear in Estelle's heart was fear for her lover. It was vague yet very real. She felt danger, and for the

next three days she had banished him from her sight. She was glad yet did not know why she was glad. She was not clear why she had banished him, she had had no intention of doing so, the necessity had come to her only as she talked to him. She did not know of what she was afraid, there was no fear of her husband, but of something intangible, something she must face alone, through a space of time during which her lover must not come near her. Full of purpose she went forward, she never thought of looking back.

She entered the house unnoticed as she had left it. She had never made any secret of her going and coming. She had nothing to hide, no sense of wrongdoing. Had Bocara met her in the hall and asked where she had been she would have told him. A lie was impossible to her. She had no fear of her husband, but she no longer had any pity for him. He had become alien to her life, outside it. That he thought of her as a woman, that desire for her could burn in his eyes, was hateful. It made her feel unclean, it debased truth and love. The thought of it had almost made her shrink from Bruce's caress today. In three days—

That belonged to the future, she was in the present, must act not merely think of action. Crossing the hall she opened a door which led into a part of the house which was little used. Into a wide stone passage there, many doors opened. These were the servants' quarters when Lantern House had echoed to the footsteps of many guests, and Georgian men and women had made merry in its rooms or played with love in the alleys of its gardens. Before one of these doors Estelle stopped, paused for a moment, then opened it, and flinging aside a heavy curtain, passed into a darkened room, muttering broken phrases in *Hindustani*.

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CHAPTER VII

"Don't touch me! Don't come near me! Even if I should cry out to you, do not come."

1

"MOTHER is deliciously humorous and doesn't know it," said Philippa as Gerald came into the drawing room at Lennox Lodge.

"That is better than being a bore and fancying yourself amusing," he answered. "I cannot allow anything to be said against your mother, Phil. She is a wonderful woman. What has she been doing to agitate you?"

"Read that," and she handed him a society paper, somewhat thin and emaciated in these days for want of paper.

Palgrave read aloud: "We hear that Lady Dealtry has for the time being discontinued her charming dinner parties which have become such a feature in the literary and artistic circles of London. Lady Dealtry, we understand, is so convinced that it is the duty of every man and woman to help this country to get on with the war that she is withdrawing from all merely social engagements. We can only commend Lady Dealtry's patriotism and appreciate her action which must be a real sacrifice to one of her artistic temperament."

"Mother is stopping them because of Mr. Ockenden's death and in case people should say unpleasant things. It

is comic making a virtue of it. She was awfully annoyed when I told her so."

"Camouflage, Phil, it is in the air. Church and State, high and low, honest folk and others, all use it. Deception sounds horrid, but camouflage is a delightful word. It will live. And talking of Ockenden, I called on Oliver yesterday and today, but he was out on both occasions."

"Surely you are not persecuting Oliver with your theories," said Sir Charles, who had entered the room with Lady Dealtry.

"I haven't had a chance, besides, it isn't persecution. It is an opinion I want."

"But I understand that part of your theory was that Oliver would not express any opinion, that he could tell a great deal if he chose."

"Yes, Sir Charles, but I have not said that his silence may not be justified," Palgrave answered. "I want his opinion if I can get it, and if not I want to speak a friendly word of warning."

"For which I do not suppose he will thank you," said Lady Dealtry.

"I do not want thanks if I can only get him to listen. We are old friends."

"I was in Kew yesterday and saw him in his car," said Lady Dealtry. "He was evidently coming back from Richmond. I expect he had been to see the Bocaras."

"Ah yes, I remember," laughed Sir Charles, "that is another part of the theory. I suppose it is useless to point out that he is a doctor who is quite likely to have patients in Richmond, and that the Bocaras are not the only, nor the most important people who live there."

"And they do not happen to live at Richmond," Philippa remarked, "but on the East Sheen side of the Park."

"Oliver is interested in the Star and Garter Hospital

and that often takes him to Richmond, I believe," said Palgrave. "My theory is so exactly along his line of thought he ought to be intensely interested in it. As I have not been able to catch him at home I have written to him asking for an appointment."

"He will take you for a patient," said Philippa.

"And may not be very far wrong," said Sir Charles. "This thing has become an obsession with you, Gerald."

"I believe it has. One of those things you are obliged to go on with whether you like it or not."

They were a party of four tonight, and dined early as Palgrave was taking Philippa to the theatre. Lady Dealtry, having had her patriotic fervor announced in print, believed in it so firmly that she was inclined to disapprove of theatre going except to war charity matinées, but then Gerald was lame and Philippa had always been a law to herself.

In the taxi, and between the acts, they discussed Bruce Oliver.

"I feel awfully catty for saying it," Philippa confessed, "but I believe he goes to see Estelle Bocara. I asked her about him the other night at the Falconers'. She said he had dined with them, but her casual manner seemed forced to me."

"I cannot imagine her disguising anything," Gerald returned. "She generally says exactly what she thinks, and half her time she is thinking on fantastic lines. Were she an old friend of Oliver's she might fit into a place in my theory. You see, Phil, mine is rather a fantastic idea and I want Oliver's opinion about it."

"Only his opinion?" she asked.

"Yes, it sounds rather an hesitating yes, doesn't it? but I mean it. Recurrent madness in recurrent circumstances, that is the theory in a nutshell, and I grant that Bruce

Oliver fits it in a measure. But I know him so well, he is so sane in every way, and——”

“And yet you are rather expecting he will give himself away when you get a confidential talk with him,” Philippa suggested.

“The idea has entered my head, but——”

“That is sufficient answer,” she said as the curtain went up. Probably Palgrave’s account of the play’s progress would have been a poor one because before the curtain was well down again he took up the subject at the point where he had left off.

“No, I do not expect Oliver to give himself away, because I have come to the conclusion there is nothing to give away directly. Indirectly there may be. That is where I stumble upon doubts. Of course, whoever is the criminal he is innocent of all intention. The madness passes, there is no memory of what has happened, and the madman is as sane again as you or I.”

“My dear Gerald, you do not get away from your doubts of Dr. Oliver.”

“Directly yes, indirectly no. I think he must know something, possibly suspects someone, and therefore keeps his mouth more firmly shut than is good for his own reputation. He is being discussed more than ever, some very unpleasant things are being said, and when I get a talk with him I want to put him on his guard. Somebody at the club the other day remembered that he had written a wonderful pamphlet on little known poisons, and another fellow began to talk of Ockenden’s death and suggested poison as the cause. Then someone else wondered whether there could be any connection between the two, and there you are. To say the least of it Oliver is an ass if he takes this kind of thing lying down.”

“Unless he has a reason,” said Philippa.

"Exactly, and if he has, the time has come when he can no longer afford to keep it to himself. There is another curious thing. You remember my telling you about the death of Dupont in Paris, the French impressionist artist, well, I met a man two days ago who knew all about Dupont's death, and so far as I could judge he died in a similar way to Scrivener and Ockenden."

"Was Bruce Oliver in France at that time?"

"Yes, in Rouen I believe."

"So we get back on to the old line of suspicion," said Philippa after a pause.

"As a matter of fact, Dupont's death gives a knock to my theory," Palgrave returned. "Scrivener and Ocken-den both died at the time of the full moon, Dupont died just before new moon. The popular idea which connects madness with the moon is rather fundamental to my theory."

After the performance they were fortunate enough to get a taxi, not an easy matter with petrol rationed and drivers apparently licensed to be insolent, and on the way home Palgrave suddenly remembered that they had not mentioned the subject which they had promised themselves to discuss that evening, namely where to live and how to furnish.

"I am awfully sorry, Phil, but this detective business has got me by the throat."

"I forgive you," she laughed.

"I'll take tomorrow afternoon off and we will go into Kensington Gardens and settle neighborhood and furni-ture."

"In the afternoon! Leave the Ministry of Munitions to talk of such an unimportant thing as getting married! What would mother say?"

"Need she know? Besides, our marriage is by no means

an unimportant matter, though to tell you the truth, Phil, I believe discussing furniture is. You are certain to want your own way, and I am as certain to let you have it."

"Always!" she asked laughing.

"Except when it isn't good for you."

"That will be always," she said quite definitely.

2

Gerald Palgrave's letter lay on the top of the pile which Bruce Oliver found on his breakfast table. It was the third day of his exile. Tomorrow he would see Estelle again, yet he looked pale and haggard, there was no joy of anticipation in his face.

On the first day he had driven into the country, starting early, and there was no patient at the end of the journey, which was a small village a little removed from one of the upper reaches of the Thames, too remote to enjoy the patronage of any river people, and according to Williams, too remote for any sensible person to think of living in. A rather decent old inn, with a buxom and pleasant Hebe to administer cooling drinks consoled Williams during the hour or two he waited for his master.

Bruce Oliver walked from the village towards the river, to a fair-sized cottage hidden amongst trees, with a lawn running down to a backwater, a place of pleasant sights and sounds, of song, of perfume, of flowers, and in the distance the never-ending music of a weir. He had the key to the cottage, and he passed slowly from room to room. It was furnished, not as he would have furnished it, but comfortably, unobjectionably. Alterations could be made presently. One room with a dressing room adjoining he examined with special care, mentally discarding the furniture it contained and putting other pieces in its place.

It took him a long time to decide whether he could do as he wished with this room. On returning to the inn he asked many questions concerning provisions, the nearest railway station, the people living in the neighborhood.

The morning of the second day had been devoted to patients, the afternoon to accumulated correspondence and to a visit to a house agent. After dinner he had shut himself in his laboratory and remained there until five o'clock this morning. Two hours' troubled sleep and a cold bath had not served to obliterate the effects. He looked like a man who had been dissipating, was conscious of it, realized that his hand trembled a little, and for the first time in his life, he dreaded facing the patients with whom he had appointments this morning.

He opened the letters as they came and read Palgrave's through twice. Oliver did not want to see any of his friends just now, but Palgrave said it was important. Most probably he wanted to warn him of malicious tongues as Martha Houghton had done. His first impulse was to put him off, but he reflected that Gerald Palgrave was a man with ideas, was his friend, and might be useful. He would want a staunch friend presently, and Palgrave was likely to bear the strain he must put upon friendship better than any other man he could think of. He would 'phone to him after breakfast and fix an evening after he had seen Estelle again. It might be wise to take Gerald into his confidence.

There was a considerable number of letters, letters from patients asking for appointments, begging letters, bills, two lengthy screeds from doctors criticizing statements he had made in a recent article on heredity proclivities, which he put aside for future consumption, and then at the bottom of the pile there was a letter which he opened as casually as the rest, but read excitedly.

"Come to me this afternoon. I shall be alone in the house, waiting for you. Do not fail to come. Let nothing I have said prevent your coming to me here. Remember, I shall be alone. ESTELLE."

It was the first time Oliver had seen her writing, the envelope had not prepared him for the letter. The night spent in his laboratory had tried him severely, had brought a nervous strain and filled his brain with wild imaginings, he was not ready to grapple with this new situation. What had happened? There was intense earnestness in her letter, and some fear surely, or why had she asked him to go to the house when she had been so definite that under no circumstances must he do so? Was she ill? She had been in a strange mood three days ago when he had last seen her. Or had Bocara discovered the truth and become dangerous? A revengeful spirit aroused in such a man would be capable of anything. In the overwhelming fear which came to him Oliver rose hastily to ring the bell and order his car at once, but halfway across the room he stopped and read the letter again. She particularly asked him to go in the afternoon, and she would hardly have called him to the house if Bocara knew what had happened. The letter was definite, he must obey it if he would serve her as she desired.

This conviction calmed him, steadied his nerves. He was ready to take her away this afternoon if necessary. He was prepared to meet the great moment in their lives. He finished his breakfast and arranged his day carefully. The chauffeur came in for orders.

"I shall not want the car this afternoon, Williams, but later this evening, perhaps, I might require it. I want you to be ready to come at once if I telephone for it, and in that case we should probably be out of town for a day or two."

"Yes, sir."

Oliver then telephoned to Gerald Palgrave and asked him to come to Hobart Place tomorrow evening, he could telephone to him again or send him a wire if he had to take Estelle away today. He telephoned also to Martha Houghton, just to see that she was available, he told her. He expected to want her during the week for the case he had mentioned. "Yes—yes it would be a long case," he said, answering her questions. "Difficult? Yes, the most important I have ever undertaken. A man? No, a woman. They are always the difficult cases, Little Mother. No, I cannot give you any particulars over the 'phone, but it will be a long case and will take you out of London." He tried to speak calmly, but Nurse Houghton knew him well enough to understand that the case must be a serious one for him to say so much.

The requests for appointments which had come that evening Oliver put aside, he would answer them after he had seen Estelle, and having made these arrangements he felt better. He went to his consulting room and for the next two or three hours was the grave doctor, keen, precise, definite.

3

As Bruce Oliver turned out of Hobart Place he nearly ran into the arms of Professor Bocara. It was horribly like being caught.

"Ah, Dr. Oliver, you startled me. I had not remembered I was in your neighborhood."

"You were not coming to see me, then?"

"No. We do not need the doctor at Lantern House, only the friend. You have not been to see us again."

"I am a busy man," said Oliver, feeling like a liar.

"And this is a busy day because you hurry. It is also

with me. I have been giving a lesson in Cavendish Square, and now I go out of town to give one in the country. It is a young Lord who expects diplomatic employment. It happens once a week and I stay the night."

"You must love the work to—to take so much trouble."

"It is because of the people I meet," smiled Bocara. "Because I teach, doors are opened to me which otherwise would be shut. Visit us soon, Doctor. There is always a welcome."

Oliver thought of Estelle's simile of passing from one chamber to another, and the closed door between which she would not open to her husband. He had decided not to use his car this afternoon, the letter seemed to make secrecy necessary, now he wished he had used it and so avoided this conversation with Bocara. It had turned the seamy side of his love towards him, made him conscious of deception, vulgarized an idyll, made right wrong. Yet, during his journey, he realized that it was not only the meeting with Bocara which was responsible for this reaction, but also the fact that Estelle was taking advantage of her husband's absence, was stooping to intrigue, was acting as any intriguing woman might do. The hours in Richmond Park were sacred, outside the conventional world, because Estelle, at least, was innocent of evil, a woman apart; but to go to Lantern House, knowing that Bocara would not interrupt them, was another matter altogether.

It was very strange that he should have met Bocara at such a moment; and that Oliver should wonder if it were a warning, a barrier raised across the road he was travelling, showed how deeply he had sunk into the mystic atmosphere which surrounded Estelle. Now she had stepped down from the high pedestal on which he had placed her, and he was perplexed and uneasy in his mind. The *strong wine of his decision turned to water.*

Further reaction took place as he approached Lantern House. His antagonism to Bocara took hold of him strongly as if his very dwelling place radiated evil influence. He hated Bocara's smile, his suave manner, his eyes, the smooth voice which had bidden him visit them and be welcome. He was suddenly conscious of fear for Estelle. Had the Professor prepared a trap for them? It was possible. It was very curious he should have met him as he turned out of Hobart Place. Was he there of set purpose? Could he know of the letter? Having taken vengeance on his wife, had he satisfied his lustful soul by looking into the face of her lover, knowing whither he was bound and what he would find there. The thought had a thousand horrors in it and lent wings to Oliver's feet. The half formed resolve that he would not visit Estelle today was forgotten.

The native servant who opened the door showed no surprise. He did not wait to be questioned.

"Madame is waiting," he said. "The Master is not at home."

Evidently he had received his instructions. From whom? From his master or mistress? Oliver looked for some chance clue in his inscrutable face.

"Will the Professor be in presently?" Oliver asked.

"He did not say. Madame is waiting in the little temple," and the servant opened a door into a wide stone passage, standing aside to let him pass. "It is the third door on the right. The Doctor will forgive, but it is not for me to approach the temple unless Madame demands it."

He closed the door, leaving Oliver alone in the passage. That Lantern House should have a private chapel was understandable, although unexpected, but it was beyond belief that Estelle would receive him there. Something was wrong, hideously wrong. Fear brought clammy

moisture to his forehead as he hurried to the third door on the right, opened it without knocking, and flinging aside the heavy curtain within, entered.

4

The metal rings rattling on their metal pole awoke an echo, followed by utter silence. Nothing moved in the dim light which filtered through the darkened window, so dim a light that for a space nothing was clear to Bruce Oliver beyond the fact that he had entered a sanctuary, that mystery lurked in the dark corners, and that the pungent smell of some peculiar incense was in his nostrils. A few moments passed before his eyes became accustomed to the light, and then he saw that he was in a long, narrow room, the walls of which were hung with dark and heavy tapestry. At the far end was a dais, across which curtains could be drawn. They were parted now. On the dais stood an altar, raised on two steps, and behind the altar was a seated wooden figure, an idol the size of a big man. It might be intended for a representation of Buddha, but Oliver thought not. It was not hideous, but without any adventitious aids to make it so, it was repulsive. The designer's art was crude, but he had succeeded in giving to the figure a vague aspect of power, malicious yet not without seduction, full of suggestion and irresistible influence. Never until this moment had Oliver realized how full of personality an idol may be, how real an influence to a mind rendered susceptible by environment.

At the foot of the dais, in a big and elaborately carved armchair, sat Estelle, looking small in her huge setting, yet full of strange dignity. Her dress was heavy, Oriental, of brilliant colors, a garment which hung from her shoulders in straight lines of many folds; and loosely wrapped round her shoulders was a shawl of black silk richly inter-

woven with thick gold thread. A band of gold set with gleaming jewels, a diadem fit for a queen, circled her head; barbaric chains of gold were about her neck and waist, and upon her fingers were many rings. It was a dress of ceremony, evidently the high ritual garment of a priestess, and the woman was deep in a trance-like reverie which deadened her senses to all sights and sounds of the outer world. The rattle of the metal rings had not disturbed her, nor Oliver's movements as he entered. The open door which brought a refreshing draught into the heavy atmosphere, turning into spirals the thin straight line of smoke from the incense burning in a small golden bowl upon the altar, made no impression upon her. She was so still that for a moment Oliver wondered if she were dead, placed in this ghastly environment of state for him to find, but he was quickly aware that the chains on her breast rose and fell with regularity, and that the color of her cheeks was of health and life. For some time Oliver watched her as if he feared to startle her from her reverie. He did not move. He waited, expecting her to become conscious of his presence, gradually realizing that the heavy atmosphere, and the great image, and the whole environment of this strange sanctuary, were lulling his senses and causing his body to sway gently. He tried to grip the floor more firmly with his feet lest he should fall, and then to break the spell he spoke:

“Estelle, you sent for me.”

He spoke in a whisper, the place seemed to demand it, and there was a feeling that the image would be less likely to interfere. Estelle did not move. Her arms remained inert, stretched along the carved arms of the chair, she did not turn her head, and yet in some subtle way she changed as if his voice had reached to her inner consciousness.

"You sent for me, Estelle, and I am here," Oliver said after a pause.

Very slowly she turned her head and looked at him as if he were a stranger, no recognition in her eyes, just consciousness of an alien presence in this temple, an intrusion, a sacrilege. She was not startled, only her head moved, her arms remained stretched along the arms of the carved chair, and there was not a tremor in the folds of her dress to indicate returning animation to her body. Yet she was more alive than she had been a few moments ago, and Oliver watched her closely, curiously. She was not recovering from the effects of a drug, her condition was a mental one, he decided. Inert as she was she seemed strangely full of life, the life of movement, not of the world but of life greater, more abounding, more profound, that pulsing life beat which knows nothing of death and fills everything beyond the limits of all time and space, that life which exists everywhere but is never born incarnate into the world. He could almost fancy that movement was painful to her. It was trance, but of a kind wholly outside his experience. She looked at him, then slowly turned to look at the idol, then turned to him again. There was no recognition in her eyes, yet there was no suggestion that her mind was a blank, rather that her mental processes were trying to account for the presence of the idol and the man in the same place. She was in suspension between two controlling forces.

"Estelle!" Oliver said again, and took a step towards her.

With a clash of the golden chains which hung at her waist she sprang to her feet as if his movement had broken a spell. She thrust out her arms to him, and the black, gold-threaded shawl slipped from her shoulders to the floor. Oliver took no more than one step towards her,

for there was no welcome in her eyes, nor in her outstretched arms, only repulsion and forbiddance.

"But you sent for me," he said.

From his face her eyes travelled to her own outstretched hands, and her expression changed. With a sudden swirl of her lithe body she turned to the idol.

"This is evil," she cried in a strong, passionate voice, moved by some intense emotion. "This is evil, and I was promised all good. It is against the wicked and blasphemous in life that I strive; by what power then comes love into my temple?"

It was more a reproach than a demand for enlightenment, a fierce and sudden rebellion against ordered destiny. Was Estelle mad that she questioned this wooden image and stood with her arms raised to it expecting an answer? Oliver watched her, and vividly recalled the recent hours he had spent in his laboratory. The world would pronounce her mad, but in spite of the confusion in his mind, Oliver's judgment was looking deeper than the world sees. Practical thought and decision were impossible in this place. He waited motionless and in silence, and under the influence of his surroundings would not have been taken wholly by surprise had some answer, some sign been given. At this moment anything seemed possible. He might have been afraid had not his whole thought and energy been concentrated on the woman. For some minutes she stood facing the idol, then her arms fell to her side and she turned to Oliver. Perhaps she had received her answer, a silent answer which he could not understand. It was evident she recognized him now, but she was still a priestess more than a woman.

"I did not send for you," she said.

"But your letter—I have it here."

"I wrote no letter," she answered, and then hesitated.

as though some doubt had crossed her mind. There was a struggle between the priestess and woman, and the woman prevailed. "No, I wrote no letter. Should I bring you to your death when your life means life to me?"

"Estelle, come out of this place."

"Don't touch me," she cried, shrinking back from him as he made a step towards her.

"Estelle, trust me. Hold my hand and let me take you away. Nothing shall hurt you. There is nothing here which can hurt you."

"Don't touch me," she cried, terror in her voice, and yet for just one instant it seemed that she would obey him.

"Come out of this place, Estelle. It is not good for you to be here."

The hands which had almost gone out to him were suddenly clasped tightly behind her back, and with an awkward and strained gesture she half turned to the idol.

"Evil is here and nearly destroys us. Don't touch me! Don't come near me! Even if I should cry out to you do not come. Power Almighty bring good. Let no harm touch my love. Shield us at this moment and through all time."

Oliver let the hand he had stretched out fall to his side, and in an instant Estelle turned again to him, her hands still clasped behind her back.

"Don't come near me. Go quickly. Did I not bid you not to come here under any circumstances?"

"I cannot, I will not leave you here like this," he said.

"Go. Go, and do not attempt to see me here or anywhere until—until I tell you."

"Tomorrow—in the Park!"

"Nowhere until I tell you. The amulet!"

"It is here," Oliver answered. "You will wear it now."

"No. It has preserved you, even against me it has preserved you. Keep it close. Go."

For a moment Oliver hesitated, then he obeyed her. Something stronger than his own will directed him, and he went slowly out of the little temple, closing the door behind him.

5

For a little while Estelle stood looking at the place where he had been as if she still saw him there, as if she were still afraid that he might touch her. She did not at once unclasp her hands from behind her, she did not seem certain that Oliver had gone. There was a troubled look in her eyes as she searched the dim corners of the room, fear in them. She was facing something unknown. A new experience had come to her, she had no comprehension of its meaning. She felt sore and strained as one who had been in a crowd which disputed for possession of her, which had torn her this way and that. She looked down at herself almost expecting to see wide rents in her dress, marking the struggle through which she had passed. She turned again questioningly to the idol, but she did not plead to it any more; she did not understand but in some way it had failed her. Life had departed from it, and all virtue, yet vaguely she attributed the failure to some defect in herself. She picked up the shawl and wrapped it round her shoulders. She reseated herself in the carved chair, falling into the exact attitude she was in when Oliver had entered. She was perfectly still, her reverie might never have been broken. For a time her eyes stared straight before her, her attitude was tense and expectant. She relaxed quite suddenly, her body became limp, utterly exhausted, her head fell back against the chair, her eyes were closed, and the color was drained from her cheeks. *She might have been dead.*

For an hour she remained limp and motionless, then life began to stir in her again, like a breath of evening rustling the leaves after a still, sultry day. Her color came back slowly, and she sat up rubbing her eyes. She looked round the room enquiringly.

"Bruce," she whispered, wholly woman as she spoke his name. He had been there, she was quite sure of that, only just now he had been there, but she was glad he had gone. It was strange she should be glad, presently she would remember why, would recollect what he had done to make her glad that he had gone. She glanced down at her dress, felt the shawl, fingered the gold chains at her neck and waist, and looked at the rings she wore. They were all quite familiar to her, were a part of her life, or had been; but now there was a sensation of something passed, done with, something to be discarded and forgotten. She had never felt this before, was not quite sure she was glad to feel it now. She turned to the idol, her brow knit with perplexity. For the first time she was observant of the wood of which it was made, and of some of the crude workmanship in it. It was a very ordinary figure. She got up and stood at the foot of the dais looking up at it.

"I know I am not like other women," she murmured, "but today—*everything* is different today."

The incense in the golden bowl had burned out but the fumes of it were heavy in the air. She moved the bowl to one side, and taking off the shawl folded it carefully and laid it on the altar. She took the diadem from her hair, the rings from her fingers, the chains from her waist and neck, and arranged them neatly upon the shawl. She was going through some familiar ritual, doing it mechanically. Then she hesitated looking down at the dress, and glancing at the gold ornaments lying on the shawl. They seemed to be in their place there, she never folded anything else

to place on them and cover them. No, they were always left there in the sight of the image to whom they belonged. Yet the dress. She always put it on before she entered the temple, but today—after a pause she loosened it at the shoulders, it was an unfamiliar action in this place, but today it must be done. The garment slipped from her, falling in a heavy ring about her feet, and she stood slim and upright, a woman clad only in dainty undergarments of silk and lace. She stepped out of the ring slowly, wonderingly. She did not touch the dress, it had no place on the altar. She left it just as it had fallen from her in a ring. Then she pulled a cord which closed the curtain hiding the image, and hurried out of the sanctuary.

CHAPTER VIII

"A kiss, Estelle, a kiss such as yet you have never known."

1

IN spite of his anxiety the predominant sensation in Bruce Oliver's mind that evening was one of satisfaction. His experience that afternoon had confirmed a large part of his theory at any rate. He had not been prepared for the scene which had occurred at Lantern House, he had not expected a temple, an idol, incense, vestments, all the paraphernalia of a high ritual, but his whole theory rested upon the assumption that Estelle was intermittantly under some powerful influence, most probably a religious influence, and undoubtedly this was the case. Her history, as Bocara had told it, her life as she had herself explained it, had strengthened the idea, but what had puzzled Oliver was the fact that, on the whole, it was a beneficent influence, taking her out of the narrow ruts of mere convention and giving her soul unlimited space in which to wander. His theory demanded a pernicious influence, and he had found no sign of such an attitude in talking to Estelle. Today he had been able to probe deeper into the mystery. He had supposed that the processes at work were purely mental, entirely on a spiritual plane, instead of which he had discovered that there was a material side, outward and

visible signs which were both barbaric and sinister. It was difficult to adjust the relationship between the two, but Estelle's behavior today had given him a clue. She had shown unmistakable signs of struggle, she had evidently been torn between two ways of action, between a course she herself recognized as evil and another course which was fixed in her mind as love. She had turned upon the image in rebellion, almost accusing it of being the cause of evil, yet in the same breath petitioning it to save her love. The position was only possible, Oliver argued, to a woman as innocent as Estelle; in any other, good or evil would have gained a definite victory. The idol undoubtedly stood for something malignant, Oliver had been convinced of this the moment he saw it, and whoever had initiated Estelle into its worship must have desired that in some way its malign influence should touch her and direct her actions. To what extent had it done so? It seemed certain to Oliver that in a general way the device had failed, that Estelle had found in the ritual she practised only a help to those wide soul flights which were manifest even in her ordinary conversation, but this was not to say no evil had come from her. Under certain conditions she might be used as an unconscious medium, and real religion, deep and wide as space, might on occasion be debased into religious mania capable of wickedness and destruction.

From the first he had attributed to Professor Bocara the malign influence acting upon Estelle. In some way it was accomplished through her studies with him, but he was not clear how it was done. It was easy to assume that it was by mesmerism, or some form of transmitted will power, but neither Estelle's character, nor facts as *Oliver* knew them, supported this assumption. In some ways Estelle dominated her husband's will. Nor had

Bocara's object been apparent to Oliver, but some enlightenment had come that afternoon. He had found Estelle to all intents and purposes worshipping at the feet of an idol which he was convinced was intended to personify a malicious force, and he could not dissociate from this fact Bocara's statement, intense with meaning, that he was waiting for Estelle to awake, no doubt to awake and be the kind of woman he desired. Oliver shuddered at the thought of what such a woman might be, a beautiful devil perverted in mind and body, all sense of love lost in uncontrolled passion, all good designs converted into desire for evil. The thought was the more appalling because in an incomprehensible way he could visualize Estelle as such a woman, could see her exactly the opposite of what she was, and felt that he knew what she would be like if Bocara could have his way with her.

Moreover, it was certain Bocara had planned evil for him. Either he had written the letter, or influenced an unconscious Estelle to write it, certain that he would go to Lantern House. No doubt it was intended that he should find Estelle in a religious trance and so place himself in grave peril. What the peril had been Oliver did not know, but he was convinced disaster for him had been intended, that it had only been averted by Estelle herself becoming aware of the danger, conscious that where her soul expected good she saw evil. Bocara had failed only because of the fundamental and essential good in Estelle. Why had he not always failed? Oliver was convinced that he had not always done so.

Here lay the crux of the problem, but Oliver faced it calmly. Today Estelle had rather curiously opposed evil with love, not with good. Love and good were not synonymous terms in her mind at the moment. There was special significance in her appeal for the preservation of love, for

love had come to her through him, through the man she was intended to destroy. Was it too much to assume that love was the counterbalancing force to evil, that now love had possession of her the strength to those other forces which had been brought to bear upon her would be broken. Oliver believed this would be the case, although the process might be slow, but he was also convinced that some physical cause contributed to her mental condition. With this belief at the back of his mind he had asked her many questions, and today her whole attitude had gone far to establish this belief. He was not distressed by the way Estelle had dismissed him. The loving, fearful woman had not been altogether hidden in the priestess battling against evil force and suggestion. But Oliver was doubtful whether she would send for him, it might have been only the priestess who said that, the woman had already made the appointment for tomorrow after sending him into exile for three days. She had almost certainly been conscious that a crisis was imminent and had sent him out of harm's way.

On the following afternoon Oliver was driven to Richmond Park and went hurriedly to the sanctuary in the woods. It was empty. He waited for more than an hour but Estelle did not come. The woman must have spoken through the priestess yesterday. There must be some good reason why he should not see her until she sent for him.

2

Estelle Bocara wandered about her garden, Karac beside her. She talked to the gardener, but a little absently, an effort was necessary to show any interest in his suggestions, and she had none of her own to offer. The old man supposed she could not be well, yet he had never seen her

look better. It was unusual for her not to take an interest in what he said.

Physically listless her mind was restless. She longed to be free from these enclosing walls, to go with flying feet to that sanctuary in the woods, to the love for which she hungered, which she knew awaited her there. She knew Bruce Oliver would be waiting, knew that the three days were over, but she also knew that the crisis which she had foreseen was not yet past for her. Something more there was to do, what it was she did not know. She could only wait. She was quite aware there were periods during which she was in close touch with the spiritual side of life. Partly they were spent in her little temple, in retreat, and partly in the world where, it seemed to her, she lavished the fruits of her silent contemplation with the gods, dispensing to others some of the good which she had received in secret. Then quite suddenly she was normal again, with no special power, her office of priestess laid aside. Today there was no desire to lavish good, this time the desire had not come to her. Everything was different. All feeling of elation had evaporated, but there was no sense of accomplishment as was usually the case, and she was quite sure she had not yet recovered her normal condition. And she was particularly anxious to be herself, a desire which had never troubled her before. She had endeavored to achieve it by extraneous help, by dressing herself in the simplest gown she possessed, but to no purpose. Something more was to happen, she was on the threshold of a further revelation, and must wait.

At any other time she would certainly have gone to her husband and suggested study, taking him into her confidence, today she was glad he was not in the house. She did not speculate about him, he would come presently; indeed, *she felt that her waiting was connected with his*

coming, which in a vague way she dreaded. The fact was astonishing. She had never dreaded him before. What was to happen must be something outside all her experience.

She dined alone, wearing the same simple dress, almost a pathetic figure in the corner of the great dining room.

"Coffee in the drawing room," she said as she rose.

She switched on only one of the electric bulbs, a colored lamp of exquisite workmanship which glowed like a great jewel. She sank into a deep chair, and the servant set the coffee on a low table beside her.

"Should anyone come I am not at home," she said.

The man bowed.

"If Dr. Oliver should come I cannot see him," she said.

The man bowed again and left the room.

For a long time she sat there, doing nothing, not even thinking with any concentration. Once she half rose with the intention of sending for Karac to keep her company, but she did not do so. The great Dane must not come into the house tonight. It was her own decision, she was not considering her husband's dislike of the dog.

The utter silence and loneliness presently drove her to the piano, and it was weird music her fingers brought from the instrument.

She left the piano and drew back a curtain from one of the windows. Moonlight flooded the garden, casting black shadows, the light of the full moon, so clear and brilliant that only a star here and there was palely visible. She longed to go into the moonlight, to bathe herself in it, yet she did not open the window. Half hidden in the folds of the curtain she remained motionless, her thoughts stretching out into space, bridging the present with the past, and linking both with that glorious future which extended beyond all the limits of time.

Suddenly she turned. She had not heard the door open, but she knew she was no longer alone.

"How you love the moonlight, Estelle."

The Professor closed the door and stood looking at her.

3

"How you love the moonlight," Bocara said again, as if it were a phrase, some code sentence which had special meaning for her.

"Sometimes," she answered as she drew the curtain sharply across the window, shutting the moonlight out. She came slowly from the window and stood by a high-backed chair wholly unconscious of her surpassing beauty, but intensely sensitive of her husband's scrutiny. "You have just returned?"

"Not five minutes ago."

"And wish to study?"

"Not tonight. Why do you ask, Estelle? Have you a desire to study?"

"No," she answered definitely.

"Of course not," he said with a smile. "Our work here is finished, yours and mine. We are leaving England."

"When?" She did not start at the information. She spoke as if she were rehearsing a part.

"As soon as passports can be arranged," he said carelessly, yet with a certain masterfulness. "It is difficult in war time, but through an influential pupil of mine I shall succeed quickly."

"And why do we leave?" she asked, without showing any real interest in his answer.

"Our work is done, but there are many reasons besides. It is not pleasant living so close to war and death and sadness; there is so little sunshine in this land; there are so

few who have time to study the languages I teach; there are—”

“I want the real reason,” she said slowly. “It is for me to decide whether I shall leave England.”

Something in her attitude evidently surprised the Professor. She was suddenly keenly alive, very definite, very sure of herself.

“You and I, Estelle, are not like other people,” he said after a moment’s pause, and his tone changed, although it was still masterful, and the deference which he usually paid his wife was almost entirely lacking. “We are not content to skim the surface of things and think ourselves happy. At times we look into the vast depths and understand. You are especially blessed for you have been given power to look into the human heart and see the evil in it when the rest of the world is ignorant that such evil exists. It has been my joy to help you, my privilege to help you as no one else could.”

“As no one else could,” she repeated.

“Is it not true?”

“Yes. I have felt it.”

“And at this moment we are not bound very closely together!” Bocara said, as if he would compel her to an affirmative answer. “It is so recently that we studied together.”

“Yes, but something strange has happened.”

“Is it not usually so after we have studied together? Some evil ceases. We know it although we cannot always say what that evil thing is which we have conquered. We are instruments used without conscious knowledge. It is our privilege, yours and mine.”

“This time it was different, and I never felt less bound to you than I do at this moment. I shall never study with you again.”

"It will be in a different way," he said.

"No, it will be never in any way. I cannot tell you why I know this, but I do. It is not a belief but a certain knowledge. Everything is different. This time no evil has ceased to exist. It is rampant and wanders loose tonight."

Bocara looked at her keenly and was at a loss how to answer. She was not in the mood in which he expected to find her.

"It is because circumstances have changed," he said after a pause. "That is why we are leaving England where our work is finished."

"Finished! It has not yet begun."

"It is finished," he said. "Presently you will understand. There is other work to do. You have had strange visions, Estelle, is it not so?"

"Visions?" and there was a note of interrogation in her voice.

"Visions, yes, I know, for they have come to me also, glorious visions," he said in a soft but tense tone. "Listen, Estelle, I will tell you why everything is different. Only gradually will you understand, but full knowledge will surely come. I shall still be your teacher but in another way. It has been my part, first to save you from death, then to care for you as a child, then to marry you that you might remain a child and not be as other women. Yours was a higher mission, given you by unseen powers, and I was chosen to guard you while you fulfilled your destiny, knowing that some day, when your work was done, I should receive my reward. Your work is finished."

"And your reward?" she asked.

"That is the glorious vision which has come to me, a vision from one of the high peaks of life, a far vision seen through clear air. It is ordained that I should be no more

your husband in name only, but in reality. It is to be in our own land, that lifelong joy of ours, in the land of your adoption where true passion is. Youth is given back to my heart that I may be one with your youth and beauty. This is why everything is different. The change has come quickly, in a moment, as a room is flooded with light instantly at the pressing of a button. Tonight begins the Springtime of love."

He took a step towards her.

"Stay!" she said.

"Estelle, I shall teach you love."

"I, too, have awakened from a dream, a very long dream," she said.

"It is love that wakes you," he cried, and with a sudden movement, quick and lithe as a panther's, he was at her feet, his hands were clasped round her knees and for a moment his face was buried in the folds of her gown. She tried in vain to draw away from him. "It is love, Estelle. I love you, not as a man loves his child, but as a man loves a woman, an unspeakable love, not of words, but of look, of touch that thrills, of passion that feels and trembles and is most eloquent in silence."

She made another effort to escape from the arms about her knees.

"Passion was in me from my birth, Estelle, that wild passion, real, primitive, beautiful, a passion of which in these cold, sunless lands men can know nothing, but it lay dormant in me until you came. No woman, looking at me, had stirred it, no woman had touched it into quivering life. I cannot tell you why I was different from other men, I only know I was different. My whole strength was waiting for you."

With her hands she tried to push him from her. He did not seem to feel her effort, nor her touch even.

"You came and stirred it, this passion of mine. Your girlish beauty woke it, and no more was there for me any woman in the world but you. You were my child, more passionately loved than child had ever been, and passion burned more fiercely in me day by day as you grew to perfect womanhood. To touch your hand was to be thrilled, to feel your body touch mine for a moment was to realize exquisite pain. Yet I suppressed my passion. I must wait because you were not as other women. I must wait and watch until you awoke. I must be a silent worshipper until the appointed time. The hour has struck. Tonight I kiss your knees in reverence, and tonight I shall kiss your lips, holding them to mine until you, too, shall burn with the fire of love. Tonight——"

He sprang to his feet, his arms flung out wide to clasp her, but in the moment of release she had stepped back and the chair was between them.

"Estelle!"

"Did I not say evil was wandering loose tonight?"

"Not evil but love."

A quiver ran through her body. Love she knew, but this was evil. The hot words of passion were hateful, they were like the panting fetid breath of some wild beast savagely gloating over a caught victim. Her whole being shivered at the thought of his touch. His praise made her despise her own beauty, his talk of kissing sickened her, made her feel unclean. She saw him as she had never seen him before, an animal, glorying in his passion, only waiting and longing to possess. It was horrible to know that for years his thoughts had soiled her. The knowledge touched in her that innate savagery which is in every woman when the sanctuary of her womanhood is threatened.

"Yes, there is love," she said fiercely, "but not for you. It is love, but not the love you speak of."

Bocara stood erect, silent and watchful. He had expected to find her different tonight, not an easy conquest yet in the mood to yield if the attack were passionate enough. Rage at his failure surged within him, but with an effort he suppressed it. Direct attack had failed, but there was another appeal, an appeal to her sympathy.

"Estelle!" he whispered.

"I would be kind if you make it possible," she answered, thinking of the companionship which had been between them in the past, and pitying him a little in spite of the antagonism he had roused in her. "I have been in a dream, conscious that my life was incomplete yet unconscious of what I lacked. The knowledge came to me suddenly, wholly unsought. It was love. I cannot explain, I do not yet know all it means to me, all it will mean. I have yet to learn."

"Yes, and I am your husband," he said.

"In name, no more."

"I shall be your teacher."

"There is another who must teach me. Only he can."

"There can be no other man. Tomorrow you will understand there can be no other man."

"Tomorrow has not yet come," she said. "It is still tonight, a glorious night in which I have touched fuller knowledge than ever before. Even you have helped me. You speak of love and only show me evil; the love I know is good."

"Estelle, I——"

"Listen and I will tell you," she said, leaning a little towards him over the back of the chair. "Yesterday—was it only yesterday?—I dreamed as I have often dreamed. Evil was near me and must be struck down. I was ready to strike, when suddenly my whole soul was in revolt because some power had deceived me. It was not evil which

had come to me, that was a lie, it was good, it was love."

"You cannot know, you deceived yourself."

"I was sure," she answered, "for the love that came to me, which I was bidden to destroy, was under the protection of my love. I cannot tell you what I said or did. Can you explain? It seemed to me that partly you were responsible."

"Tell me all," Bocara said, no movement in him beyond his lips. Had he failed, altogether failed?

"I awoke. I came out of my dream a different woman. You have never before seen the woman you are looking at now. As you say, I think my work is finished. If I hold converse with the high gods again it will be in a different way. I shall never study again with you. I awoke to the consciousness of being in a darkened room and was looking at a wooden idol."

"Have you no fear, Estelle?"

"No. I have clearer vision, that is all. In some way you are responsible for the change in me."

"Tomorrow, Estelle,—"

"It is still tonight," she said. "If you fling back a curtain you will look upon a moonlit garden. I think I know you for what you really are. It is strange your heart should be the one I could not look into. I cannot picture you with any place in my tomorrow."

"Do you bid me look into the garden that you may escape from the room?" he asked, his body quivering with anger.

"I have no fear either of you or of the wooden image. I grow more wide-awake with each breath I take. A strange exaltation is in my soul. It is good that it is still tonight for tonight brings clearer and clearer vision."

"And the night is love's time," said Bocara, a sibilance in his voice which made Estelle's hands tighten as they rested on the chair back. "You are a different woman, it

is true, gloriously true. Yes, I am responsible for the change in you, and shall teach you again. As I have taught you mental exaltation so will I teach you a rapture which is physical. You are a woman to be loved as woman should be, and I alone shall teach you love. You are mine, this also is gloriously true. All the world knows you are mine, and it is tonight, still tonight—love's time."

Passion and anger were let loose. With a sudden movement he swung the chair from between them. It fell against the table on which the coffee things were, overturning it, smashing the delicate and costly china.

"Stop!" she cried, so imperiously that the man obeyed. He was a lithe animal arrested at the very moment of his spring. For an instant he was afraid of the woman standing tense and erect within a yard of him. It passed. If superstition gave him momentary pause, he realized that she was different tonight, that she was heretic to the bonds which had bound her, therefore unprotected.

"What can you do?" he laughed. She was not to be persuaded then must he take by force. "What can you do? Even if you could reach the bell yonder and summon a servant, would he dare to oppose my will? You are mine."

His arms were round her, his face close to hers.

"You are mine. Would he dare to attempt to prevent me claiming my own? Dare you deny me? I am your husband. Give me yourself, Estelle," and for an instant his voice fell to sudden pleading. "Give, give, it is a gift I ask. The fault is yours if my pleading grows rough."

"Never," she said, shrinking from him.

"In name you are mine, and I swear you shall be mine in fact, if not willingly then by force."

She stiffened in his embrace, and he laughed. His hot breath was on her cheek.

"I shall take what you will not give. Tomorrow is not yet you say, that is well. Before morning my love shall crown you. Tonight these lips are for my kisses. You shall be mine tonight. Tomorrow—let tomorrow bring what it will, tonight is mine, mine beyond all fear of robbery. A kiss, Estelle, a kiss such as yet you have never known."

"It shall be a death kiss if you dare to take it," she cried.

Bocara sprang back with a short exclamation of terror. From her bosom, from the silver sheath hidden there, she had drawn a tiny dagger. It seemed a toy, a small thing to bring such great terror, yet the thin, keen blade looked deadly. It gleamed in the light of the jewel-like lamp, the point of it catching a flush of red as if blood already stained it.

"Touch me, come near me again," she said, "and I use it. Even a scratch, a pin prick, will kill. Tomorrow shall bring what it will to both of us. The past is over—finished."

Watching him lest he should attempt to seize her unawares, she slowly crossed the room.

"Estelle!"

"Stay where you are. You are evil. I am wholly awake," and she went out, closing the door.

3

Bocara stood looking at the closed door, his hands clenched, his eyes aflame. He was not a coward. The tiny dagger, toylike yet deadly, had frightened him, but that alone would not have restrained him from action; it was the woman herself who held him. He had expected to find her in a different mood tonight, amenable to his will; instead, she had called him evil, had threatened his life,

had snapped the bonds which bound them together. Always she had claimed freedom of action, never before had she asserted entire independence of him.

"Am I to fail at this eleventh hour?" he said aloud. "After I have risked so much, accomplished so much, am I to fail? Are the gods gone mad?"

He flung out the question with something of the same passion with which Estelle had appealed to the wooden image, and he was thinking not only of the woman but of all she stood for in his scheme of life. Tonight, Bocara had endeavored to show his wife the crowning moment of a love suppressed for her sake, of a passion which had burned and smothered within him since she had first come into his life, and which had been held in check only by his strong will. Possibly he believed that what he said was true, too carried away by the fire which consumed him to realize what it was which had set that fire burning so furiously. It was a genuine passion but it was of recent birth. There had been times when desire had come to him—that night in Paris for instance—but they were sudden gusts, stirred by fortuitous circumstances and not understood by Estelle, and they had died again as suddenly as they had been aroused. It may be that Bocara had looked forward to ultimate reward, but chiefly he had been intent on keeping Estelle a woman apart, knowing not love, passionless, child-like in her emotions, so that she might fulfil with him the work he had set himself to do. He was superstitious, the work was more to him than the woman, and his stability of purpose and power of self suppression were far greater than most men's. For the work's sake it was possible he might have been content to let the bond between them remain always as it was. The coming of Bruce Oliver had changed everything, and the knowledge that another man had awakened love in the

woman Bocara had protected as his child immediately caused a fierce rivalry to surge within him. An overpowering desire took possession of him. In an instant he descended from a plane mostly spiritual to one wholly physical.

"Evil!" and he ground his heel on a fragment of the broken china lying by the overturned table. "Evil! Is it evil when a man desires his own wife?"

Again the question was flung out as a challenge. Right was his and that right he would exercise. She was his wife and she should bow to his will as it was right a woman should. Who could stand in his way?

"This cursed doctor——" he burst out and then paused. Perhaps a ray from the lamp touched some point in the room with red, reminding him of the tiny dagger which had seemed to be touched with blood, "No, it is the woman herself. This cursed doctor cannot matter. Certainly he cannot matter. A little patience, a little—— What can have happened since I have been away?"

With sudden resolution he went into the hall and called a servant.

"Did Dr. Oliver come yesterday?" he asked.

"He came to see Madame."

"And he saw her?"

"I took him and showed him the door of the little temple. I went no further than the little temple."

"And when he left, what manner had he when he left?"

"I did not see him when he left. I did not see him after I had shown him to the door of the little temple, and I did not see Madame come from the temple."

Bocara looked at him steadily for a few moments, then dismissed him, and as soon as he had gone went to the door opening on to the stone passage. At the door of the temple he paused. It was possible Estelle had come here straight.

from the drawing room, and thinking he had followed her, she might use the tiny dagger without further warning. She might kill him or herself, or it might be that death was here already. He was prepared to defend himself as he opened the door and cautiously swung back the heavy curtain. Moonlight came faintly through the opaque window and touched the hangings which concealed the altar. It shed a vague light on a dark heap lying on the floor, and Bocara drew in a quick breath through his teeth. He went closer, satisfaction rather than fear in his movement, and then he stopped again. It was only a heavy robe lying there, lying in a ring. It puzzled him, he did not understand why it should be there, and he glanced quickly about him, fearing some danger hidden in the shadows. There was no movement anywhere and he went to the altar and pulled the cord which parted the hangings. For a few moments he stood looking up at the image, muttering a prayer perhaps, or it may be thinking of Estelle's statement that she had changed and was only conscious of a wooden idol; and then he looked at the chains and the jewels which Estelle had placed upon the shawl on the altar. He hesitated for a little while, as a man who fears to be sacrilegious, then he picked up one of the rings, and drawing the curtains sharply together again went hastily out of the temple to his study.

The moonlight faded from the garden, the first streak of the dawn showed in the East. Silence was in the house. A stair may have creaked in the night, or from behind the wainscoting a stealthy sound may have come, the nibbling of a rat, but they made no impression on the man sitting there by the light of a single hanging lamp, his eyes fixed upon the ring which lay on the table before him.

CHAPTER IX

"Youth has faced realities and is asking clamorous questions."

1

BRUCE OLIVER had forgotten all about the appointment he had made with Gerald Palgrave until the servant showed him into the study.

"You look exceedingly busy," Palgrave said, pointing to the pile of books upon the table.

"I am, but I am glad to see you nevertheless. I am trying to solve a problem which touches time and space, mystery, and the devil himself."

"A tall order, Oliver."

"I want to tell you about it. I had not decided to do so when I got your letter, but I have come to the conclusion that I want a friend rather badly. You may be able to help me. There are the cigars."

"My dear fellow, I asked for an appointment because I wanted to do the talking," Palgrave returned, "and you have got to listen to me because it is serious."

"Light a cigar, Gerald, you will talk better. We both appear fairly wide awake so we'll thrash out this business even if the sitting lasts a night and a day. Have you come to advise me to deny the things which are being said about

me? It may help you to know that Nurse Houghton has already interviewed me on that subject, and not for the first time I assure you."

"I am going to talk a great deal plainer than she did probably."

"You can't, but fire away. I will listen patiently on condition that afterwards you listen as patiently to me."

"That is agreed," said Palgrave, lighting a cigar. "I am likely to try your patience."

"Risk it," said Oliver, taking a cigarette and leaning back in his chair.

"I am not sure whether I ought not to begin with an apology. Philippa is a little anxious about your attitude towards my interference."

"She is worrying herself unnecessarily," Oliver returned. "And in any case you are determined to go through with it, eh?"

"That is my pig-headed intention exactly."

"I thought so."

"I claim a friend's privilege," said Palgrave. "As you know, Oliver, no great success has attended my efforts at the Bar, my own fault no doubt, but the fact has given me ample time to write a little and to think a great deal. My legal training has influenced the direction of my thoughts, and it has pleased me to fancy there is a touch of the detective in me. Hence my intense interest in the death of Anthony Ockenden."

Oliver nodded.

"You must not resent what I am going to say. I am simply working out a case. Now Ockenden and Scrivener both died suddenly after dining at the Dealtrys'. We have the exact dates in both cases, because Scrivener did not leave Lennox Lodge until late on the night he dined there and could not have reached home until the small

hours of the following morning. You remember he was found dead in his study early the next morning. You and I happened to be present at both these dinners."

"And conscious of your own innocence you are inclined to doubt mine," said Oliver.

"I am not through with bare facts yet. Ockenden lunched with you on the day of his death, and you were attending Scrivener at the time of his death."

"Rather damning evidence," said Oliver. "You imagine I was in the position of being able to tamper with the lunch, and could doctor Scrivener's medicine, eh? To be precise the first would be rather difficult without the connivance of a servant, and it happens that I neither gave nor prescribed any medicine in Scrivener's case. I did not even see Scrivener after his death. I left town early that morning and did not return for a fortnight. Perhaps that is further evidence of my guilt."

"For the moment I want to stick to facts as I know them," said Palgrave. "The verdict in Scrivener's case was that he died from heart disease, the verdict in Ockenden's case practically comes to the same thing."

"Scrivener had heart disease," Oliver returned. "He consulted me and I warned him against overwork and excitement. He was in the hands of his own medical man who gave a certificate I believe. I am being precise."

"It was easy to put Ockenden's death down to heart disease, Oliver, but I am convinced you did not think it was heart disease. You see I am being brutally outspoken."

"At any rate I could not swear it was anything else," was the answer.

"In a way you are connected with both these deaths," Palgrave went on, "and since they have excited public interest and imagination, on account of the eminence of the victims, people have talked about you."

"And not for the first time. I have got quite used to being talked about."

"The talk used to be vague questions, Oliver, now it has become statements of facts. Only the other day I heard it stated that you had a wonderful laboratory where you were in the habit of torturing animals. Quite recently I heard a man, whose position in the medical world must give weight to his words, declare that it was known amongst hospital men that you had operated merely for the sake of acquiring knowledge and with little or no consideration for the patient's welfare."

"It is true I have operated when no one else would, chancing alleviation or a cure against certain death, but in every case the patient has known the hazard and was prepared to take the risk. Your medical friend put the matter crudely, to say the least of it."

"Some persons have gone further," Palgrave continued. "Drugs were mentioned at the inquest on Ockenden. If death were not due to heart disease it might be due to drugs—poison. It was remembered that you were an expert on out-of-the-way poisons and had written articles and pamphlets on the subject."

"Since collected and published in a small volume," said Oliver. "That is the book by the cigar box, the red-covered one. I have been consulting it myself this evening."

Palgrave took it up and looked at the binding and the title.

"There was only one more step for these persons to take," he said, "and some of them have taken it. Was it possible, they asked, that you had caused the deaths of Scrivener and Ockenden, perhaps in the interests of science?"

"They were uncertain regarding the motive, eh? My word, that is giving a dog a bad name and hanging him with a vengeance, isn't it?"

"Don't you see, Oliver, that you cannot allow such things to be said and take no steps to defend yourself. You would not be the first doctor who had brought an action for libel. I could supply you with a name or two, no doubt Nurse Houghton could supply others."

"And frankly you have grave doubts about me yourself, is that the crux of the whole matter?"

"I am in the position of a detective working out a case."

"That is not a very direct answer to my question," said Oliver. "You are not quite convinced that I am guilty, and if conviction comes you will no doubt excuse me by pronouncing me mad."

"If conviction came probably I should, and it might come if you refuse to prosecute."

"You would force my hand to clear up your own doubts."

"Can you wonder at my attitude?" Palgrave asked. "To be definite in a case of this kind is a little difficult but I must admit a theory into which you might fit. Periodic madness is a possible condition I take it!"

"Oh, undoubtedly. Popular idea has connected such a condition with the moon."

"Is that idea wholly exploded?" Palgrave asked.

"Scientifically I should say it was, but I will not be dogmatic on the point. I have quite recently come to the conclusion that in many things it has not been given to science to say the last word. The moon may have, probably has, an exciting influence on some temperaments. Has your theory anything to do with the moon?"

"It has. These two deaths have many things in common. Nominally at any rate both men died from heart disease, both after dinner at the Dealtrys'; both were well known, even famous men, and both died at the full moon."

"And it was full moon only a few hours ago," said Oliver. "*The coincidence is very interesting.*"

Palgrave regarded him keenly for a moment, speculating whether the remark might not be an indirect proof that his theory was near the truth.

"Here are the dates," he said after a pause, taking a small diary from his pocket. "Between these two dates there were of course many others when the moon was full, and I have searched the newspaper files to see if any mysterious death occurred on the intervening dates. I have found nothing. No famous men met their death mysteriously at this precise time. One of the points of similarity is that the two victims we know were famous, and my theory demands that the madman would be consistent, would only attack well-known people."

"That is certainly a point to remember," said Oliver.

"I must urge another point," Palgrave went on. "At the two dinners in question, excepting our host and hostess, only you, Ockenden and I were present on both occasions."

"Are you quite sure of that?" Oliver asked with interest.

"Absolutely certain."

"Do you happen to know anything of Scrivener's movements on the day he dined with the Dealtrys?"

"He attended a political luncheon and afterwards was one of the speakers at a woman's political league at the Caxton Hall."

"I was at neither function," said Oliver. "I must say you have worked up the case most thoroughly, Palgrave. A man, sane as a rule, has periods of homicidal mania corresponding to the time of the full moon, and in his sane moments has no knowledge whatever of what he has done in his mad ones, is that it?"

"Is it impossible?"

"No, and I certainly might fit the theory."

"There is one more point which tears a big rent in my

theory," said Palgrave. "Have you ever heard of Dupont—Emile Dupont?"

"I don't think so."

"He is a French artist, an impressionist, and besides a rather rabid patriot and politician, one of those dreamers who, without doing very much themselves, inspire men to work towards the realization of the dreams. He died on the fourteenth of September last year in the same way as Ockenden did."

"Where?"

"In Paris."

"Dupont, Scrivener, Ockenden," said Oliver, musingly, as if his thoughts had wandered away from his companion's theory. "Three famous men."

"With this difference," said Palgrave. "Dupont died at the new not at the full moon."

"That is a big rent in the theory, isn't it?" Oliver returned.

"Yes, and you were in Rouen at the time."

Oliver looked at him for a few moments in silence. The suggestion of doubt was the most definite Palgrave had made.

"It happens that I was in Paris for a few days," he said quietly. "I was there on the fourteenth of September."

2

Oliver threw a half smoked cigarette on to the hearth and went to the sideboard.

"You have finished, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And you cannot say that I have not listened patiently. Have a drink! You deserve it, and it will fortify you to listen to my confidence."

"No, thanks, I won't drink just now."

"Afraid of my expert knowledge of poisons, eh?" said Oliver, helping himself. "I assure you, you are quite safe. You hardly rank amongst the famous, do you? Better change your mind."

"I don't think it is a joking matter, Oliver."

"I never felt less like joking in my life," was the answer. "Dupont's death tears a considerable rent in your theory, if your facts are correct, but perhaps it can be mended. I have been working at a problem, too, burning the midnight oil over it, studying bits in almost every book on the table there, and forfeiting sleep. My problem hinges on yours, and we may help each other. You have not told me much I do not know, except about Dupont—I have never heard his name before as far as I can remember. Believe me, Palgrave, I am not pleased at being talked about, but before I decide upon any action I want to give you my confidence. And that you may thoroughly understand my position I will show you the famous laboratory of which people tell such queer tales. Moreover, you shall witness a little experiment."

Setting down his empty glass, Oliver crossed the room and opened the door in the panelling.

"I don't think I want to witness any experiment," said Palgrave.

"Will you change your mind and have a drink first?"

"No, thanks. A secret door, eh?"

"This entrance was designed for convenience as a matter of fact not for secrecy, although it happens to be secret enough to be a point against me," said Oliver with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

Palgrave became suddenly interested in his cigar, the short end remaining appeared to be coming unrolled. He was startled at being taken into confidence in this pre-

cipitous fashion. He could not forget this was the time of full moon. Oliver's quick knowledge of the fact without its being called to his notice was disconcerting. His whole attitude of mind was, to say the least, peculiar, and Palgrave was by no means certain that he had not to deal with a periodic madman at the time when he was most dangerous. His theory certainly demanded that the victim must be famous in some way, a condition to which he could lay no claim, but at this moment he was not so confident of this part of his theory. He had no desire to enter the laboratory just now. With the secret door closed upon them—well, anything might happen.

Oliver understood some of the thoughts which were passing through his companion's mind.

"Afraid?" he asked.

"Afraid! No."

"A little, I think," said Oliver. "Is it of the experiment or of me?"

"Of neither."

"Come then. For your comfort let me say that I have an idea that periodic madmen are consistent, and there is nothing dreadful about the experiment I am going to show you."

Palgrave threw away the end of his cigar.

"Badly rolled," he remarked. "I am ready."

"That is plucky of you. I am inclined to think the greatest heroes must be looked for amongst the nervous men. I will close this door. I loathe being disturbed when I am working down here. There are six steps. Let me go first and switch on a light. Do not expect to see anything very wonderful or very dreadful because you won't."

Palgrave was not afraid, but he was very much on his guard as he followed the doctor down the half dozen steps.

3

Oliver switched on the light, disclosing a small but perfectly fitted laboratory, with no signs of the horrors which had been so persistently talked about.

"The usual paraphernalia," he said. "The tales told about this place are so grossly exaggerated that they are nothing short of lies. I am not a sentimentalist, and for the ultimate good of humanity I would risk much, have risked something. At times I have experimented rather dangerously on myself, and I have often experimented on animals, but never brutally. You will be able to judge for yourself. We are going to try an experiment of the kind tonight."

"On an animal? I would rather not, Oliver."

"My dear fellow, be reasonable. You cannot interfere in affairs of this kind without taking the consequences, pleasant or otherwise. Besides, I am most anxious to have your opinion."

"Can it carry any weight?"

"In the circumstances very great weight indeed. You profess to be my friend, and I want a friend badly. To begin with I must make you understand my position clearly," and from a small cage in the corner, which Palgrave had not noticed, Oliver took a rat. "Look at him. He is quite tame, well fed, perfectly happy, and is in the best of health. You can handle him if you like, he won't bite. You prefer not to? Perhaps you do not feel competent to tell a healthy rat from one sick unto death."

"Healthy or sick they have never interested me much."

"Wonderful how some of us neglect our education," said Oliver, feeling his companion's suspicion, and a little bitter at it. Then he laughed at his own annoyance. Palgrave had some reason for his doubting frame of mind. "Well,

you must take my word for it that he is perfectly healthy. We put him on the table. He is not in the least afraid you see. We will give him something to eat while we make our preparations."

Palgrave was on his guard. He might have to deal with a madman before he was many minutes older, and he intended to be extremely careful. He would not help the experiment in any way. He would not touch anything.

"Is the experiment really necessary?" he asked.

"Yes. I want an unbiased opinion, an opinion free from all medical prejudice. You are not going to see anything disgusting. Our little friend here is not going to suffer an instant's pain, but I want you to watch him steadily all the time so that you can recall details. They are of the utmost importance. Details carefully noted in this laboratory, Palgrave, have enabled me to save many lives in France, and in the future may lead to the conquest of diseases which at present cause the death of thousands of men, women and children. The tragedy of an animal doesn't really count against that, does it? Do you wonder that I don't care a damn what people say about me?"

Oliver placed a small box upon the table, a sealed tube containing a tiny quantity of a colorless, oily liquid, a hypodermic needle, and then put on a pair of gloves.

"We will put this food on the box," he said. "You will observe, Palgrave, that the rat will have to sit on its haunches to reach it. See, there is something human about the way he uses his forepaws. We let him have that bit to whet his appetite. It is quite evident he appreciates it, and will go for the next morsel we put there with avidity. You must wait a minute, friend rat. We get a drop of this liquid on to the needle, rather a delicate business, Palgrave, and don't you touch anything,—just watch."

The rat allowed Oliver to handle it, and did not appear to feel the prick of the needle.

"There, my little friend," said the doctor, letting the rat go free on the table, and placing another piece of food on the box. "You will not be able to resist the attraction of such a supper. Watch him closely, Palgrave. I give you my word that the food has not been doctored in any way."

For a few moments the rat did not move, then becoming aware of the succulent morsel, it went to the box, sat on its haunches and grabbed at the food with its forepaws. Suddenly one forepaw was bent sharply back towards the body, while the other was thrust straight out; the jaws moved quickly nibbling at nothing for an instant, then both paws were thrust out and the rat pitched forward against the box—stone dead.

Oliver watched the rat until it fell, then turned to his companion who was leaning forward over the table as if the tragedy had hypnotized him.

"The rat was quite healthy, but it was a sudden and peculiar death, wasn't it? What do you think of it, eh Palgrave?"

"My God, Oliver! Action for action the rat was a ghastly caricature of Anthony Ockenden."

"Exactly what struck me when I first tried this stuff on another rat. You look pale, Palgrave. Get back to the study, mix yourself a drink if you feel like it. I will just clear this away and follow you in a minute."

Gerald Palgrave had mixed himself a strong whisky and soda when Oliver joined him.

"Feel better, eh?"

"Yes."

"It was the thought of Ockenden's death which upset you, not the dead rat. The sight of that caricature made me feel queer for a moment the first time I saw it. To-night I was prepared. You must admit it was necessary you should see the experiment."

"I am glad I have seen it."

"You answer as carefully as if you were in a witness box," said Oliver a little irritably as he lighted a cigarette, and then after a pause he went on: "Since I have written on the subject it will not surprise you when I say that I have experimented in various ways with little known poisons. In that small cabinet in my laboratory I have some poisons which Featherstone brought me—the African traveller, you know, vegetable concoctions chiefly, used for poisoning arrows and for all sorts of deviltry by the native medicine man. There are one or two poisons in that cabinet which I doubt whether anyone else in this country has handled. Chiefly my experiments have been for the purpose of trying to discover antidotes to various forms of disease. Your medical friend whose word carries such weight would not believe me, perchance, but I want you to be friendly and give me the benefit of the doubt."

"I am anxious to hear about the stuff you used tonight," said Palgrave.

"You must let me tell my story in my own way," said Oliver. "Quite recently I have been experimenting for a different purpose, trying to solve a problem which has troubled me, trying, in short, to produce the effect which you have seen tonight. That poison I have only had in my possession for two or three days. It was given me, or rather lent to me, by a doctor who has had a lot of plague experience in India, and who happens to be rather interested in some of my work."

"What poison is it?"

"It comes from a small but particularly deadly snake found in India, and only there, I believe. The poison in the tube you saw is not pure. Some native scientist has discovered a method of doctoring it whereby its potency is greatly increased while its action remains to all intents and

purposes the same. Rather a dangerous individual that scientist, I expect, but I take off my hat to his cleverness."

"There can be very few who know anything about this poison," said Palgrave.

"Very few," Oliver returned. He had been walking about the room, now he sat down facing his companion. "Very few indeed, but at the outset of what must be a long story I want to prevent your imagination running riot. Remember, the poison I have used tonight has only been in my possession a day or two. It was not in my hands when Scrivener died, nor when Ockenden died. I had never handled it before I got that tube from my friend, the plague doctor. I cannot prove this, except, of course, as regards this particular tube, you must take my word for it."

"But you knew of it, knew its peculiarity."

"No, strictly speaking, I did not, but when I saw Ockenden die I realized that the manner of his death was familiar. I suspected poison. I jumped to the conclusion, naturally enough, that the familiarity must arise from some experiment I had tried, and I confess to having caused the death of several rats in endeavoring to reproduce the action you have seen tonight. Suddenly I remembered why the peculiar manner of Ockenden's death was familiar. I remembered seeing a woman die of snake bite in India, and her death was similar to Ockenden's. He could not have been bitten by a snake at Lady Dealtry's, so I went to my plague friend. As his name happens to be Smith there is no harm in mentioning it. Had he a more distinctive name I should not have called him by it for fear the public might persecute him. He may be more thin-skinned than I am."

Palgrave made no comment but Oliver smiled.

"You are inclined to believe that my Smith is a close relation of the famous Mrs. Harris, that no such person

exists. Let me assure you that Smith is real and that neither he nor I is responsible for these deaths."

"But you know who is."

"I can only answer vaguely by saying that my word would carry little weight, and that the only evidence I could bring forward would almost certainly cause suspicion to fall on the wrong person."

"Certainly that is a good reason for silence," said Palgrave.

"You agree that as matters are at present I should not be believed unless I could produce proof which a blind man could almost see."

"It is really your own fault, Oliver."

"And I am going a step further still. I am going to place myself outside the respectable pale altogether. I am going to run away with another man's wife."

"Nonsense. I cannot imagine your being such a fool."

"Why not? I have the reputation of not studying conventions. Theoretical revolutionists are amongst the first to be shocked by the practical performer. I have not read it, but I believe Lady Dealtry wrote a most daring book some time ago, and I am sure she will be among the first to punish my slip from the social highway to the best of her ability. I am running away with Madame Bocara."

"Estelle Bocara!" Palgrave exclaimed.

"It has a very ordinary, common, and sordid sound, hasn't it? Having shocked you with the bare statement I will try and justify myself."

"You mustn't do it, Oliver. Think of your career, your—"

"My dear fellow, let us get to bedrock. Did you not come here this evening to convince me that my career was in jeopardy unless I prosecuted somebody?"

"But this is quite another matter," Palgrave returned.

"Is it? Do you know Madame Bocara's history?"

"No."

"I am going to tell it to you as I know it from her, and from her husband."

Oliver threw away the dead stump of a cigarette, and leaning forward in his chair he told the whole story as he knew it, bare facts without comment, and without any attempt to explain the woman's mystical attitude or the position her husband had deliberately chosen to occupy.

"The story helps me to understand her better," said Palgrave when Oliver had finished. "She has always been an enigma to me."

"Those are just the dry facts," Oliver went on. "Let us keep the story on its low level for the moment. You understand, Palgrave, there has been no love, on her side at any rate, and there has been no real marriage; now love has come to her and we are going away."

"Of course, it is a strange story, a romantic one, if you like, but in the divorce court——"

"Exactly. Popular prejudice will not differentiate it from the sordid tales which are dressed out in sensation to sell the evening papers," said Oliver. "We shall have kicked over the hard traces of convention and are therefore condemned. But believe me, Palgrave, even along the deep and narrow ruts of convention which the world has dug there is going to be a general crumbling before we are much older. This war has set the picks of destruction to work, and the trench system in religion, in social affairs, in politics, in everything, is going to be cleared away. The preliminary rumble of the destruction is even now in our ears. The old order is in process of being pitched overboard, Palgrave."

"Very likely," was the answer, "but even so I fail to see the excuse for running away with another man's

wife. Even youth may pull up short before considering that an estimable performance."

"Enthusiasm runs away with me," said Oliver gravely. "You must forgive me. My mind has lately worked on wide plains and is perhaps a little out of focus. I am a traveller in a strange country with a very imperfect knowledge of the language. But consider the position for a moment, still on its low level. Is such a marriage as the Bocaras' right?"

"Perhaps not."

"Doesn't the very idea of it fill you with loathing?"

"I am not so easily moved; besides, if, as I understand you, the time is coming when all men shall approach a better equality, then we must not quarrel with such a marriage. The Egyptian, or whatever he is, is as good as the white woman."

"That isn't true," said Oliver. "You must not touch fundamentals. Your parson, learning a wider religious sympathy, does not let go fundamentals, he only realizes the deeper meaning in them. Such a marriage is hideous."

"Still, I do not gather that the woman was forced into it; she acted on her own free will."

"She had the heart of a child, Palgrave, and did not understand. She has the heart of a child still. She sees no shadow of wrong in what she is doing. To love me is natural, wholly good and right."

"Have you explained things to her?" Palgrave asked.

"Fully, the world, the flesh and the devil, and they interest her as little as Xenophon would interest a cradled babe."

"I can sympathize to some extent, but if you want my advice——"

"I don't, old chap. It is a vice of mine never to ask advice, I always decide for myself. But I do want your

sympathy and your friendship. Let me take the story on to a higher level for a moment and try and justify myself to you. I act deliberately while Estelle acts innocently, but frankly, I care no more for what the world has got to say than she does. I need not tell you that I love her, but I do want to tell you how I love her. In my love there is all that love between a man and woman means, and because I have not frittered my affections away, played the social moth either innocently or viciously, the love I am capable of is probably greater than the average man's. But this is not all. Love has touched me in my very ideas of life and existence. Quite apart from all desire, I am convinced that what I do is right by an altogether higher law and standard than the world recognizes. From the very first moment I met Estelle Bocara she gave clearer sight to my mental vision. I understood where I had only groped in darkness, I grasped the core of truths of which all my science had only shown me the fringes, the outer husks. I saw life and the meaning of it, not in small watertight compartments, as it were, but as a great whole, and I began to comprehend the interdependence which must necessarily exist between a thousand seemingly conflicting ideas. It seemed to me, Palgrave, that all my life had been a gradual training towards this new revelation, that my work in France had come as a kind of finishing course to prepare me for it. I was being schooled for the inevitable. For weeks before I met Estelle I was conscious of a subtle change in my outlook, conscious of waiting for something to happen. Think me fantastic, if you like, but do not question my sanity."

"Believe me, Oliver, you have my sympathy."

"Are you going to stand my friend?"

"How am I to help you?"

"Chiefly by remembering my version rather than the

divorce court story which will be told," Oliver answered. "For myself I care not a snap of the fingers. After my confession, explanation, whatever you like to call it, you may appreciate how little the world's opinion troubles me, but I admit a desire that those who have known Estelle should not look upon her as an ordinary erring woman. She isn't. Will you be my friend in this?"

"I will do what I can, but whether I shall convince a coarse-minded and flippant world is another matter."

"I have tried to justify myself."

"You have impressed me a great deal," said Palgrave.

"That is good, very good," Oliver returned. "I am going to impress you more. I am going to tell you more about Estelle, much more, and about myself, and why I do not deny the tales told about me, and why I made that experiment tonight. I am going to——"

He stopped abruptly as the room door opened.

"A lady to see you, sir," said an evidently sleepy servant.

"Bruce!"

Estelle Bocara had followed the servant closely and had spoken before she was aware that Oliver was not alone. She stopped, looking from Oliver to Palgrave, then laughed a little nervously.

"I am very sorry, I disturb you. It is very late, I know, but I had to come."

CHAPTER X

*"It is better to take a wrong road than not to move at all.
Stagnation is a crime against life."*

1

PALGRAVE glanced at the clock as Oliver crossed the room and took both of Estelle's hands in welcome. It was past twelve o'clock.

"I was just going," Palgrave said, lying to relieve an awkward situation, and then he went on speaking carelessly, "I think you have forgotten me, Madame Bocara. We have met at Lady Dealtry's."

"Ah, no, I do not forget. You are to marry my dear Philippa. I have not forgotten, but I am agitated because I have taken Dr. Oliver by surprise. I must talk to him, now, at once. It is very important."

"And we have been talking about you," Oliver said quietly. "Please don't go, Palgrave. Be a good friend and wait for me in the dining room. You promised to bear with me until daybreak, and I have much more to say."

"About me?" Estelle asked.

"About you and other people."

"You can count on me, Oliver," said Palgrave. "I will take another cigar, if I may."

"Does he know?" Estelle asked when he had gone and the door had closed behind him.

"I was telling him. What has happened, dear?"

"I have come to you, Bruce, and I can never go away any more."

Oliver took her in his arms. She was afraid. He had seen fear in her eyes the moment she had entered the room.

"You must hold me fast, Bruce," she whispered, clinging to him, "so close that between us nothing can ever come. You must never let me see him again. If he comes here you must hide me."

He put her gently into a big armchair and sat on the arm of it.

"You are safe with me. Tell me all that has happened."

"Tell me first what I did when you came to Lantern House, to the temple. Tell me everything, leave nothing unsaid."

Oliver told her exactly what she had done, and repeated almost every word she had said.

"You are sure you did not touch me," she said.

"Quite sure. You would not let me come near you."

"It is wonderful," she said with a little sigh of contentment. "I do not really understand what has happened, but I will explain as well as I can. Bruce, dear, I do not worship an idol, as you call it, but an Almighty Power of which that image you saw is the symbol. It is natural to express the unknown by a sign, and the ignorant may in error worship the symbol rather than the reality. It is always the same, this difference between the ignorant and the learned. In this land is there not a difference? You have a cross, it is not your God but it speaks to you of your God. Sometimes you have images, too. Surely the ignorant often pray to the cross and these images. No, there is not much difference between you and me. Here you speak of faith, in the East we think we have knowledge. Now, I was set apart for a great work, Bruce."

"Who told you so?" Oliver asked.

"No one told me, the knowledge came. I cannot explain that work, but in some special way which I do not really understand, my mission was to fight sin and evil. Often it was an evil which the world did not recognize, something hidden, obscure. Talking now, here in this room in a normal way, it is very difficult to explain. I have been only the instrument, and the tool cannot know what is in the mind of the user. I have told you of my times of elation followed by quiet peace. It was then, I believe, that my work was accomplished."

"How?"

"I cannot tell, I do not know. Perhaps the Professor does, because he has helped me."

"In what way?"

"We have talked together of the evil that is in the world. We have studied the religions of the East together."

"And you have become elated and forgetful of yourself as he talked with you?" Oliver asked.

"Sometimes, but more often the change in me did not seem to come at once, and at times I did not respond at all."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite," she answered. "When elation came it was something in myself which occasioned it. Study with the Professor seemed to help me, that was all."

"Perhaps I shall be able to explain that later," said Oliver. "Tell me about tonight."

"Tonight he said that my work was finished, that we were to leave England, that——" She broke off suddenly and shuddered.

"Have no fear, Estelle. He shall never hurt you nor come near you again."

"It was horrible," she said. "It is difficult to tell it

even to you, Bruce. Tonight I was different. Something had happened to me, changed me, and I can never be quite the same again. You are a doctor, dear, and will understand if I say only a little. Tonight I knew that I was a woman, really a woman, only a woman, and when he came near me I suddenly knew that I hated him."

"I understand."

"I have never hated him before," she went on. "He has always had a place in my life; he has been there to protect me, to enable me to live my own life. It has meant his doing many things for me. It has seemed quite natural until—until—I think, Bruce, it began to seem strange after I first met you. Tonight he reminded me of all he had done for me, said my work was ended and that the time had come for his reward. We were to leave England, to go back to India, to be man and wife, really man and wife. It was horrible."

She clung to him for a moment as if to reassure herself of her safety.

"Tonight I knew that he was evil," she went on. "I knew that your love had come to save me from—from—I cannot say it, Bruce."

"I know."

"Always he has seemed a little afraid of me because—because I was set apart for a great purpose, at least I have always thought so; but now I doubt, I doubt everything, even whether there has ever been any great work for me to do. When he told me of this hideous love of his, he was no longer afraid. I was just a woman—his. His to do with me as he would, to be the satiation of his devilish passion. He caught hold of me. I was almost as close to him as I am to you now, and he would have kissed me. Oh, my dear, I was wrapped round with evil for a few moments."

"It is past, Estelle," and Oliver kissed the lips raised to his, almost afraid lest his love at such a moment should frighten her.

"I was afraid even before he came," she went on. "Love had made me afraid and prepared me. Here in my dress I had hidden this. Don't draw it. A scratch means death."

From the bosom of her dress she took the tiny dagger in its silver sheath.

"Give it to me, Estelle, I hate it to be near you."

"Take it, I need it no more, I am with you. I should have killed him, Bruce, had his lips touched mine. He knew it and sprang back terrified. He dared not come near me again. I walked out of the room, out of the house, and came to you. Where else should I go?"

"He does not know you have left Lantern House?"

"I cannot tell how soon he will know. I am sorry to come before you are ready for me, but——"

"I am ready," Oliver answered. "You shall leave London tonight."

"You will go with me?"

"No, I shall follow in the morning. You are going to a cottage on the river. It is prepared for us. Nurse Houghton—you have met her at the Dealtrys—is going with you tonight."

"A nurse! Do you think I am ill, Bruce?"

"Not exactly ill, but you want rest. You are going to be my patient for a little while and Nurse Houghton is going to mother you."

"But you must be there, too, Bruce."

"I shall. One question, dear. When you were in Paris, did you ever meet the artist, Emile Dupont?"

"Yes, several times. Poor fellow, he died just before we left Paris. Why do you ask?"

"Partly because I am an inquisitive doctor, and partly because I want to know everything about the dear woman I love," said Oliver, rising from the arm of the chair. "Just now I am the doctor who must be obeyed. I am going to arrange everything for you in my own way. Wait here, dear, for a few minutes. I want to give orders about the car, and I am going to bring in Gerald Palgrave. We will take him into our confidence."

"It is my lover I obey, not the doctor," she answered.

2

Oliver went to Palgrave in the dining room.

"I am getting Estelle away tonight," he said.

"Tonight!"

"Yes. I want to get her safely out of the house as soon as possible. I am not going with her. I am sending Nurse Houghton. I am just going to scribble a line for Williams to take to her. Oh, the time is of no consequence, she is expecting a sudden call. Ring the bell, will you? No, a bell might startle Estelle in her present state. Would you mind calling down the back stairs?"

Williams had gone to bed, but a servant was told to rouse him.

"Tell him to get out the car and take this note to this address," said Oliver. "Nurse Houghton will come back with him, and he is then to wait to take her and—and her patient into the country. Tell him to have plenty of petrol and to be as quick as possible."

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose you have fully considered the action you are taking, Oliver," said Palgrave when the servant had gone.

"Yes," was the answer, and in a few short and clipped sentences Oliver gave him a hurried explanation of what had happened.

"Her present position is impossible," he went on, "and I rejoice this has happened in an open way while you were in the house. I will give you more explicit information when I have got Estelle into safety. You and Martha Houghton shall know the exact truth and help us to explain to the world. Now come in and talk to Estelle."

Gerald Palgrave got a vague impression that the circumstances were exceptional, but at the same time had a very clear conviction that Oliver was taking a plunge into social ruin. Madame Bocara might have come to Hobart Place unexpectedly tonight, but the fact remained that Oliver could not have been taken wholly by surprise since he had made such careful and detailed arrangements for running away with another man's wife. Palgrave wondered what Philippa would say to him for lending himself to an intrigue, for an intrigue it was, however interesting and out of the common it might be.

When Oliver heard the car he went to meet Nurse Houghton in the hall and took her into the dining room.

"You have come prepared to go out of town, Little Mother?"

"Of course."

"I am sorry to rush you at the last moment, but I cannot help it," and very briefly Oliver explained the position and gave her instructions. "I expect to come down early tomorrow, but if I should be kept in town until the next day you know what to do and how to treat your patient. I will explain everything more fully when I come."

"As you will. I am engaged as a nurse."

"Nothing of the kind. You are asked as the best friend I have to help the woman I love. You said you would never judge me by the standard of other men, stick to that and reserve until later any censure which may be in your mind at this moment. I want you to get off at once."

Oliver was almost nervously anxious to get them started on their journey, he hardly gave nurse and patient time to greet each other.

"You will come tomorrow, Bruce?" said Estelle, holding him back when Martha Houghton and Palgrave had gone out to the hall.

"You are mine now, nothing shall keep me away from you."

"I shall be miserable until you come."

"I forbid you to be miserable again."

"Then you must never leave me any more."

"A little patience, darling, and then we shall be together always. Good-night, my love, and—and God bless us both."

The car was at the door, and while Palgrave helped the travellers to make themselves comfortable, Oliver gave Williams his instructions.

"You know the way, Williams?"

"Yes, sir, as far as the inn."

"You take the first to the left past the inn, and the entrance to the cottage is on the right—a white gate. You cannot miss it."

"I shall find it, sir."

"You must make things as comfortable and cozy as you can until I come, Little Mother. Tomorrow we will begin turning the place into a paradise."

The car glided smoothly away, and a few moments later Oliver and Palgrave watched the tail light vanish round the corner of Hobart Place.

"You will have to breakfast with me, Palgrave," Oliver said as they went back to the study. "It will be day-

light before I am through with what I want to say. The unexpected which has happened tonight makes it imperative that you should know the whole story at once."

"I have promised friendship, and friendship endures all things, even an all-night sitting. It does not bar criticism, however. This affair means social ruin, old chap."

"It means something far more important—a woman's salvation," Oliver returned, lighting a cigarette. "We'll cut the social part of the business for the present and get back to my experiment and your theory. I have had a bad time, Palgrave, and it is not over yet, but I am happier tonight than I have been for days—it seems years. It is an immense relief to know that Estelle is safe. You think I am a fool, and you are not quite convinced that I am not a homicidal maniac. First as to being a fool. I confess that, even were there no extraordinary circumstances in connection with Estelle Bocara I should have fallen madly in love with her, should have been tempted to risk everything for her, and the temptation might possibly have proved too strong to resist. No man knows the strength of his armor until he has tested it in actual conflict. Still, I believe I should have resisted the temptation, not on my own account perhaps, but on hers. I do not much care what people say of me, but for her——"

"They will talk of her, Oliver. It is no good shutting your eyes to that fact."

"Wait. Let us first consider the other point, the exceptional circumstances, as they are, not as a man in love might imagine them."

"Bocara being married to such a woman may be very disgusting," said Palgrave, "but it is not going to help you much as an excuse for running away with her."

"I am not looking for excuses," Oliver returned. "I am going to stick to facts. Ockenden's death puzzled me;

even when the post-mortem showed no signs of poison I was not satisfied that poison was not the cause of his death. I could have said a great deal at the inquest concerning poisons which leave no trace, but I had no definite evidence to offer. As I told you in the laboratory, I have since then been experimenting with poisons, but I found no clue to the cause of Ockenden's death until the phial I used tonight was lent me. I had a vague theory, but nothing definite, nothing that I could prove, so I remained silent. Now that phial, Palgrave, contains an Indian poison which is difficult to get, and is known only to a few people; does the fact suggest nothing to you?"

"Bocara. Do you mean——"

"The thought of Bocara would hardly have kept me silent at the inquest."

"You mean—— Surely you cannot mean Madame Bocara?"

"I do. The horrible suspicion—it was no more—was in my mind from the first. And I loved her, Palgrave. You may guess something of the kind of hell in which I have been living, that hell which is the consciousness of heaven just out of reach. It is always along the narrow dividing line between good and bad where men and women suffer most, the really vicious get some enjoyment out of their viciousness. I have lived at the line all the time."

Very deliberately Bruce Oliver told of the many meetings in Richmond Park, gradually drawing a portrait of Estelle which showed the mystical side of her character. He emphasized it with many little touches, and with the repetition of various scraps of conversation.

"You see, Palgrave, she is not as other women are. I have not exaggerated her attitude in the least degree, I am speaking of her out of my experience. I am not letting imagination run away with me. A few days ago I could

not have spoken so definitely because I should have doubted many of my own conclusions. I was guessing then whereas now I know. I will tell you how in a moment. But another fact before we go further, a fact I have only learned tonight. Estelle Bocara knew Emil Dupont in Paris."

"Good heavens, man, do you know what you are suggesting?"

"Perfectly. I believe she was the immediate cause of these deaths. I cannot give you actual proof, perhaps, but indirectly I may be able to convince you. How the poison was administered I can only guess, but I think by means of a ring, a slight prick given in the action of shaking hands. The constitution of the man would account for the difference of time in the poison's action. Scrivener got home before he died, Ockenden did not. I do not know how it was with Dupont."

"But the prick must have been at her will or she would have stricken down all with whom she shook hands when she was wearing the ring," said Palgrave.

"True, but I believe she was absolutely unconscious of exerting her will for this purpose, and afterwards knew nothing of what she had done. Your full moon theory is something like that."

"Yes, but——"

"Roughly speaking, she has acted under suggestion, but suggestion of a peculiar and exceedingly subtle kind," Oliver went on. "It is a difficult subject to tackle, scientifically we are a little afraid of it. We may be said to admit it in theory but to shrink from it in practice. The Church more or less does the same, and with less excuse, for it is her business it seems to me to test what lies beyond every half-open door. In the East they have gone more deeply into the possibilities of will power, and it is only by admitting this power of suggestion that many things which occur

there can be explained. It is used for purposes of trickery, no doubt, but it is used in serious matters, too."

"Mesmerism?" Palgrave queried.

"That is a crude form of it, one of the cruder forms. The suggestion I mean is far more subtle than what we usually term mesmerism. It may, for instance, act upon a crowd, each individual in that crowd adding something to the strength of the suggestion, as when a lot of people together think they see something happen which really does not happen. Or it may act on a single individual, the suggestion lying dormant, perhaps, until the moment that the action which has been suggested is required. Naturally some individuals are in a mental condition which makes them more receptive than others, and even in the same individual there will be more and less receptive periods."

"It is a horrible idea," said Palgrave.

"It is more than an idea," Oliver returned. "In its milder forms, at any rate, it is an established fact. I have known people make a game out of it in a drawing room. I am going to prove its more potent form to you in a moment. First, however, let me follow Estelle's position and give you as clear a view of her case as I can. She received a blow which stunned her directly after she had seen her father and mother hideously butchered, and in a state of unconsciousness she came under the influence of Bocara who, whatever else he may or may not be, is learned and far advanced in Eastern wisdom. You have only to look at him to see and feel that he has mesmeric power. I have had the opportunity of studying him in the intimacy of his home. Estelle has been brought up and taught by him. For some years, at any rate, he kept her from all contact with Western thought, he let the East soak into her, suggesting to her all the time her general

line of thought, confident that he had found a tool to his hand. I do not know what purpose he had in mind but it was something fanatical, no doubt. She was abnormal, and he gradually enlarged her mind along lines which would suit his purpose. I cannot follow that line with exactness, but roughly it gave her a mission, a work to perform, and without making an actual priestess of her, which would have meant her being taken out of his control, he dedicated her in a way to a god, perhaps to the very god whose idol her father and mother were said to have insulted."

"I take it this is guesswork on your part," said Palgrave, not in any scornful way but with intense interest.

"No, it is rather a logical conclusion based on my knowledge of Estelle," Oliver answered. "This particular god would naturally have a strong effect on her mind because of past associations. It would provide, as it were, the line of least resistance, and Bocara was perfectly aware that he had strong resistance to overcome. She possessed a strong personality of her own, and he was obliged to work in with that personality. If his purpose, for example, was destruction, he had first to suggest that what he wished destroyed was evil. Her demarcation between good and evil is curiously strong."

"And warped, do you mean?"

"Not at all. It is not the conventional idea, it is, I am convinced, much closer to truth. With her, good and evil are definite things, and her actions are guided entirely by her own convictions not by what the world says her convictions ought to be. For her, love is the very essence of all good, and who will deny this is a fundamental fact; therefore she sees nothing but good in leaving Bocara, in whom she has suddenly found evil, and coming to me. I am humbly thankful that in me she has found only good,

unworthy though I be of such honor. You and I, Palgrave, have got to get rid of prejudices before we can come near to understanding her. Much of what we call right and wrong is the result of prejudice or of laws which have long outlived their utility. A church, a clergyman and a ring makes a marriage sacred in the sight of the world, and we both know that many of these marriages are nothing short of infamous and indecent crimes, offences against all morality. Every doctor knows it and most laymen, but the veil of sanctity protects what is a mere farce."

"Yes, that is true, but——"

"Get rid of prejudice, Palgrave, you cannot begin to argue about real truth until you do."

"Getting rid of prejudices usually means letting go restraints altogether, Oliver."

"Better that for a time than living always with banded eyes," the doctor answered. "It is better to take a wrong road than not to move at all. Stagnation is a crime against life. However, we need not sit at home in our comfortable armchairs and argue about it, for the war is stirring us up very successfully."

"You attribute great power to Bocara," said Palgrave.

"Power and patience," Oliver answered. "I think he was wise enough to understand her complex nature and treated her accordingly. He fostered her religious bias, succeeded in setting her apart, succeeded to a great extent in making her dependant upon him, and so was constantly able to suggest to her what was good and what was evil. He was wise enough to show her real evil, allowing her sense of right and wrong full play, and then giving her mind no opportunity to readjust itself, he would suggest an attack on something which was not really evil. In short, he set a trap into which she fell."

"It sounds rather fantastic," said Palgrave.

"Facts often do," Oliver returned. "Let us replace your full moon theory by supposing a recurrent period of peculiar sensitiveness consequent upon some incident of tremendous force in the past. In Estelle's case this is supplied by the tragic death of her parents. At times, and under certain conditions, she would be much more susceptible to Bocara's influence because of this tragedy in her life, with which he was intimately connected, remember, having saved her from a like fate. Having seen evil at this time it would be natural for her to feel that evil was again let loose, and that it was her mission to destroy it. Often, not always perhaps, I believe Bocara was able to determine for her what that evil was. So she became his tool."

"You do not think the periods were regular?"

"No. I think they were determined by times of religious elation."

"And you believe she was entirely ignorant of what she was doing?"

"Yes, of what she was actually doing. In her state of elation she would rejoice in her mission, and in that condition would feel that she had destroyed something evil. Becoming normal again she would remember nothing about it. A short mental lapse, such as her fainting fit at the Dealtrys' that night, probably occurs after these periods of elation and blots out all consciousness of what has happened. It was not an ordinary fainting fit that night, it was more in the nature of a trance, and on that occasion probably occurred much sooner than usual. As a rule the injected poison would take longer to work, she would not see the result of her action; that night she did. On Ockenden's rotten constitution the poison worked quickly."

"I judge there is more imagination than science in this explanation, Oliver!"

"Something of both," was the answer. "Let me finish. Bocara married her. He was her husband only in name, he married her that she might remain his tool. Probably he had no desire to be her lover."

"Oh, come, Oliver, is that likely?"

"I grant it does not seem so, but the fact remains that he was not her lover in any physical sense. She was his instrument, and he was wise enough to know that if she became as other women, if she became a mother, much of his subtle power over her must vanish. Other forces, wholly antagonistic to his, would be at work within her."

"I cannot imagine such delicacy in a man like Bocara," said Palgrave.

"The fact remains," Oliver insisted. "Tonight the man broke the bonds with which he had bound himself. Suppressed passion may have asserted itself suddenly, but I am more inclined to think that desire would have remained dormant forever had not the woman's love for another man set fire to the passion in Bocara. The animal in him took shape. That is why Estelle came to me tonight. She only escaped by threatening to kill him. There is the weapon; a scratch from it would mean death." And Oliver showed him the tiny dagger in its silver sheath.

Palgrave looked at it lying in the palm of Oliver's hand but he did not touch it.

"You see the position," Oliver continued after a pause. "From the first I was suspicious concerning Ockenden's death and associated Estelle Bocara with it. Nothing seemed more fantastic, yet step by step I was drawn nearer conviction. I had little to say at the inquest; I could not attempt to give the lie to those who were talking about me. I could only wait. It was the only way to protect her. Do you suppose the world would believe the explanation I have given you?"

"I do not."

"You do not credit it yourself?"

"Well, there is a great deal which seems to be left unexplained."

"Naturally. There is no real explanation of nine-tenths of the things which happen daily, and which we accept without question, still, I can go a little further with this story and give you a personal experience—the proof I spoke of."

In detail Bruce Oliver described his visit to the little temple in Lantern House and showed his companion the letter which had taken him there.

"I believe that Bocara deliberately planned my death, Palgrave, and that I was only saved by the fact that love had awakened in the woman. There was a real struggle before she could force herself not to touch me, yet she remembers nothing of what actually occurred. Had she touched me I should almost certainly have come home to die as Scrivener did, as Ockenden did, as Dupont did, and God knows how many others have done of whom we know nothing. Bocara's suggestion was strong in her; it was only love for her natural mate which saved me. Bocara is probably waiting to hear the news of my sudden death."

"You have left the most thrilling part of the story until last, Oliver."

"We have come to this moment, but the story is not yet ended. I may not succeed in convincing the world at large, but I hope to convince my friends that Estelle is the woman I know her to be, as innocent of evil as a child." He got up and drew back the curtains as he spoke. "A new day has dawned and it may prove a strenuous day. I prescribe a cold bath before breakfast. I hope I have not wearied you."

"At present my mind is as confused as a rugger scrum,"

sail Palgrave, rising and stretching himself. "A bath may clear my brain."

"I hope so because there is still more to tell."

"More! Friendship is indeed a strenuous business sometimes."

CHAPTER XI

"I will adventure and play with life and death."

1

THE morning sunlight found its way into Hobart Place and into Bruce Oliver's dining room. It was exhilarating, and together with the pleasant fragrance of kidneys and bacon and coffee, helped the doctor and his guest to forget that the night had been a sleepless one.

A bath had certainly cleared Palgrave's brain, he was able to think clearly, but the position only appeared the more difficult. His promise of friendship and help had committed him to a line of conduct which he felt would live to regret. He was, so to speak, an accessory before the fact, and he did not relish the prospect of being a witness in the *cause célèbre* which was certain to come. In cold print his share in the case would appear rather nasty. Moreover, if Oliver were right, Madame Bocara was likely to have to answer a charge of murder, and Palgrave could not visualize a British jury accepting Oliver's explanation and acquitting her as an innocent woman.

They breakfasted almost in silence, each busy with his own thoughts.

"Let us go to the study and have a cigarette," said Oliver. "I can talk better there."

"One cigarette and then I must be off."

"Not yet, Palgrave," Oliver returned, looking at his watch.

"But in an hour or so your waiting room will be full of patients."

"No it won't. It never is full, and today I have no appointments."

"You have arranged matters like that, I suppose?"

"It has been necessary to think a few days ahead," said Oliver. "An important case in the country makes an excellent excuse."

"Upon my word, Oliver, I do not see any way out of this mess for you."

"On the contrary, my road is perfectly clear to me, and I am taking it with my eyes wide open. It is a fine open road, Palgrave, but it is not marked on convention's map. The fact is, most people live in ruts which, in their daily endeavor to be useful or to make money, or position, or whatever else their particular ambition is, they make deeper and deeper until they are not able to see over the sides. They end by forgetting altogether what the real world is like, and because they cannot see anything outside their rut gradually come to the conclusion that there is nothing else worth seeing."

"Last night that kind of argument might have appealed to me," said Palgrave, "but not this morning. Bath and breakfast have made me horribly practical. What exactly do you intend to do?"

"Keep Estelle out of Bocara's way. For the moment that is all that matters. It may mean my retiring from practice altogether."

"That necessity occurred to me in the bath," said Palgrave. "As things are, patients might not come even if you waited for them."

"Don't trot out any more conventional advice, old man."

"I was not thinking of doing so. What is the use of lecturing a man in a language he does not understand?"

But there was another idea which the cold bath set tingling in my veins. If Bocara's influence over his wife is as subtle in its nature as you imagine, do you suppose love has destroyed it entirely, or that distance will render it ineffectual?"

"No, I do not. To free her completely may be a slow process, and take time to accomplish. My actions must be guided by circumstances, I cannot be definite even to myself at present. As soon as I can arrange matters I want to take her out of England. I should have gone at once to Italy had the world been in a normal condition, but the enforced delay may be all for the best. I may be able to convince the world of society that Estelle is a wholly innocent woman before I take her into an entirely new environment."

"And how are you going to do it?" Palgrave asked.

Before Oliver could answer there was a ring at the front door bell.

"Bocara probably," he said. "I have been expecting him."

"An appointment!"

"No. He is searching for his wife and expects to find her here. We will have him in. Watch him closely, but whatever you do, don't shake hands with him."

"Hadn't I better leave you to talk with him alone?"

"I would rather you stayed, but, of course, if you object to being mixed up in my sordid affairs——"

"Don't be absurd, Oliver."

It was Professor Bocara, and the doctor told the servant to show him in.

as if he were a friend who could only receive a friendly welcome.

"Ah, Doctor, this is an early visit," he said, "but I am in great distress."

He did not offer to shake hands.

"Sit down, Professor. You have met Mr. Palgrave, I think. What is the distress?"

Bocara sat down, hardly noticing Palgrave.

"My wife, Doctor. She has left Lantern House.
I—"

"Why has she left?" Oliver asked.

"I have told you that she is a little strange at times, and you have noticed it yourself. Last night she was in such a mood and left the house without my knowledge."

"But what caused the mood?"

"How can I tell?" Bocara asked with a shrug of his shoulders. "She is a woman."

"Surely you must know of some definite cause," Oliver said quietly.

"No. You credit me with a perception I do not possess."

"I am judging you by myself, Professor. She is a woman, you say, as if that were explanation enough, but to me she has always seemed a woman who would not act without very definite reasons."

"Can you really think that?" Bocara asked with a look of surprise.

"I think if she were here she would have no difficulty in telling you why she left Lantern House."

It was to be a duel between the two men, and this was the first crossing of the keen blades, as it were. Palgrave looked quickly at each of them as they spoke. It was not only Bocara who ignored his presence, Oliver also appeared to have forgotten that he was in the room.

"Ah, you have not understood her," said Bocara.

"Perhaps not. Why do you come to me, Professor?"

"You are a doctor and, I believed, a friend."

"But the real reason?" said Oliver.

"I thought I might find her here."

It seemed to Palgrave that the smoothly spoken words were the real beginning of a deadly conflict, and he moved his position so that he was a little behind Bocara and could watch his movements closely. He was prepared to spring upon him should his hand go to his pocket where he might carry a revolver.

"She is not here," said Oliver.

"You give me your word, Doctor?"

"But she has been here."

"And returned home?" Bocara asked. "Have I passed her as I hurried here?"

"She has not returned to Lantern House."

"Then where is she?"

Palgrave expected Bocara to be stung to prompt action, but he did not move. He was perfectly calm and showed no signs of anger.

"The questioning must not be all on your side, Professor," said Oliver. "You say you can give no reason for Madame's action. Think again. You will be able to find a reason, I fancy."

"Will you help me? You can make a suggestion, perhaps."

"The day before yesterday I went to Lantern House," said Oliver.

"And why not?" Bocara asked.

"I was called there by that letter," and Oliver threw the letter on to a small table beside which Bocara was sitting. "I presume it is your wife's writing. It is the only letter I have ever had from her."

"Yes, it is Estelle's."

"When you came here this morning, Professor, you must have been very doubtful whether I should be able to see you."

"I do not understand, Doctor. You are thinking of something to which I have not the key."

"Have you read that letter?" Oliver asked.

Bocara looked at the letter in his hand and then said after a pause: "It is certainly a strange letter for my wife to write to you."

"Very. And she received me strangely, in a strange place."

"Where?"

"Your servant called it the little temple."

"Ah, then you must have disturbed Estelle at her devotions. Naturally she would think it strange."

"Your servant took me there, and evidently by instructions."

"He must have misunderstood his orders."

"I do not think so, Professor, and had your wife welcomed me as you intended she should do, I am convinced we should not be talking to each other at this moment."

"You are mysterious. I appeal to you, Mr. Palgrave," he went on, turning round suddenly, "is not the Doctor a little mysterious? I come to ask after my wife and all this talk which I really do not comprehend."

Palgrave looked at him and then at Oliver. He had expected an outbreak of anger, this calm individual was disconcerting.

"No, I am at a loss," Bocara went on. "I can only suppose you must believe my wife a little mad, Dr. Oliver, and have therefore advised her not to return to Lantern House for a little while. You have found her an asylum for a time."

"She will certainly never return to Lantern House."

"Oh, you are too certain. The world is not full of such certainties. I think she will return, unless——"

"I have not given her any advice because I think her mad," said Oliver, looking fixedly at him.

"Was it perhaps because you are in love with her?" Bocara asked, leaning forward a little, a glitter in his dark eyes which looked dangerous although a humorous line seemed to touch his mouth for a moment. "Ah, I see, yes. It would have been better if we could have talked alone, Doctor, but Mr. Palgrave—yes, I understand you like to have him, you would feel a little awkward with me alone. It is very natural, yet I—I would, in your place, have kept such a thing as this entirely to myself. It will not be good for you, for your work."

Oliver did not answer.

"Well, we will talk quietly, and after all it is perhaps good for me to have a witness. I understand you have persuaded my wife to run away from me."

"I have done nothing of the kind."

"You would not say it so crudely, but it comes to the same thing."

"I ask you again, what caused your wife's mood last night," said Oliver. "Answer that question and you will know why she has left you."

"And I say again, I do not know," was the answer, and Bocara, a little excited, had to feel for his words, and his accent was more pronounced. "I am taken by surprise when I find her gone. I do not expect such a thing. I do not boast, but I have done something for Estelle. She has been my care since she was a child. Mr. Palgrave will not understand but——"

"He understands," said Oliver. "I have told him all I know about you."

"That is so very little, but even so, if you have dealt honestly with me, you must have spoken of my care for Estelle. She has some affection for me, and I think she will return to Lantern House unless—unless I show that I can make a sacrifice—a great sacrifice. Estelle has always been my first thought, her good, her happiness. I do not change. Her happiness is my desire today as always, and since she has come to you it seems she wishes for your protection now instead of mine. Although I have not changed, she has. Very well, I can be strong enough to be generous. I have thought rapidly since I found she had gone. Why should we not arrange matters, Doctor, you and I?"

Palgrave moved somewhat uneasily. This kind of bargaining was beyond his comprehension.

"What do you propose, Professor?" Oliver asked, his eyes still fixed steadily upon his visitor as if to read the thoughts behind his smooth words.

"My marriage—you know the kind of marriage it has been—your law, I think, could annul it. Has the idea never occurred to you?"

"It has."

"Why, then we are in excellent agreement," said Bocara with a sudden smile which betrayed his white teeth, "and the rest is mere detail. We set Estelle right in the eyes of the world. You and I do not much care what the world says about us, but it hurts when the talk is about a woman we love, is it not so?"

"And you are prepared to do this?" Oliver asked.

"On one condition. I must be convinced that it is Estelle's wish. I could not take your word alone in so important a matter. I shake your hand to seal the bargain which shall bring her happiness."

Bocara rose, still smiling, and held out his hand.

"I will tell her what you say," Oliver returned, but he did not move.

"Why not call her into this room at once, as I think you can. It is soon settled, this bargain, and Mr. Palgrave is fortunately here to witness it."

"He can also tell you that Madame is not in the house."

"Ah, it is a pity," said Bocara, still holding out his hand. "We must go to her together."

"We shall not do that," said Oliver.

"You are not satisfied of my good faith? You will not shake hands on the bargain?"

"No."

"I do not know what more I can do to convince you of my honesty."

"Nothing you could do would convince me of it. I know more about you, Professor, than you imagine, and after last night your wife knows you."

"I think we must all be a little mad," said Bocara. "I am at a loss to understand the position. You seem to welcome my offer, to be at one with me in it, yet you hesitate to make a compact. It is a little one-sided, and perhaps you think a man like I am should be content to await the pleasure of Dr. Bruce Oliver. I am not content, for you see I do not subscribe to the belief that an Englishman is any better than—an Indian gentleman. It is India which I consider my own country. I have a little pride, it is perhaps because I am a little mad. I make an offer because I love my wife and am willing to make sacrifice for her, but I think I may have spoken too soon. Yes, I have surely been too hasty. I have myself forgotten for a moment the little detachments of my wife, and you, Doctor, know so little about her that you argue in the dark. A few weeks' acquaintance and you think you know all. I had forgotten for a moment how absurd that is."

You are attracted by her beauty, and she has said things you misconstrue, others have been deceived in the same way; and always to the real Estelle these things have counted as nothing. She forgets them as a child forgets the things of yesterday. She will come back to me. She will return to Lantern House."

"I think not," said Oliver. "I believe your power is broken."

"My power! You speak in a riddle. I keep calm when I ought to show anger because I feel we shall forget this little madness presently. You will see, Doctor, we shall be friends again. You will come to understand that you have been indiscreet, and I shall easily forgive. Are we not all children in the world's nursery, playing our games, pleasant games, some of them, others not so nice? Perhaps this is one of those not so nice. But tomorrow we forget all the games of yesterday and begin all over again. We shall be friends again, I am sure of it. For the present good-bye," and again he held out his hand.

"Ring, Palgrave, will you," said Oliver.

For a moment Bocara seemed to hesitate, almost to crouch as if for a spring, then he smiled and buttoned his coat.

"I see. You cannot be friendly with the man you intend to wrong if you can. An outward show of honesty to excuse what your heart is ashamed of. Ah, but you are a fool, Dr. Oliver, and the world is hard on fools. It forgives the strong sinners, but for fools it has little pity. You will come to understand. Under changed circumstances we shall talk again, Dr. Oliver, and then, perhaps, I shall become your teacher."

Not until the front door had closed upon their visitor did Bruce Oliver move.

"A subtle devil, Palgrave, with a will strong enough to master his own passions."

"He was prepared to bargain," Palgrave answered. "It was rather hateful, but it might have been a good way out of a difficult position."

"Everything he said had been carefully considered. He hoped that I should think the same as you do, jump at his proposal and shake hands upon the bargain. It would have meant death to shake hands with him. He was wearing a ring I have seen Estelle wear. He came prepared, not knowing what had happened when I went to visit Estelle in the little temple, uncertain whether she had touched me or not, but quite ready to be met on my doorstep with the news of my sudden death."

"And we have let him go," said Palgrave.

"What else could we do? We are only theorists, after all, and the world outside can only be convinced by facts."

"Can nothing be done?"

"Yes, but it is a very difficult position for me. I was telling you, when he came in, that I hoped to show the world what kind of woman Estelle really is, that I hope to convince society of her innocence. To do this I have to make a momentous decision. I have shrunk from action, but that oily devil has decided me. I will adventure and play with life and death, and if death should win the bout it shall have me as well. I have gone too far towards my goal in company to make the rest of the journey alone. A scratch from Estelle's dagger will suffice."

"Good Lord! What are you thinking of, Oliver!"

"An operation. That is why Nurse Houghton has gone away with Estelle. It is my belief that some form of brain pressure, probably caused by the blow she received when she was a child, some skull splinter pressing on certain brain cells, is the real reason for Estelle's periods of detachment. During these periods, which Bocara has waited for and taken advantage of, she has fallen under his

dominion and power of suggestion. If the cause can be removed, then——”

“You believe she will become a normal woman?” asked Palgrave.

“She will become her real self, I hope.”

Palgrave was thoughtful for a few moments.

“Yet I gather from what you have said that it is the abnormal in her which has attracted you so strongly,” he said, “her vision, her clear insight into abstract truth, her innocence, her child-like faith in Eastern lore. A normal woman will not be like this.”

“I do not expect to change her personality. In her the normal will not make her like other women.”

“Still there is a danger, isn’t there? You may tamper with her personality.”

“A possible danger, perhaps,” Oliver assented. “At the worst there is always the dagger scratch. I expect the tiny blade has enough poison on it for the two of us, and under certain conditions I should not scruple to use it.”

“And just one other point,” said Palgrave. “If you succeed in making a normal woman of her, the woman you say she is, if her personality remains as beautiful as you believe it to be, may she not, as a good woman, shrink from becoming your mistress?”

“You put things crudely.”

“Her readiness to be unconventional may be caused by her not being quite normal. I am trying to look the position squarely in the face. I do not think you have arrived at that stage yet, Oliver.”

“Certainly I have never thought of Estelle as my mistress,” said Oliver slowly. “I suppose you will hardly credit the statement, but my kind of love does not admit that kind of thought. If by curing her, I make her less mine, cause her to shrink from the path she has so gladly

taken, that must be my punishment for daring to be different from other men. It is a risk I must run, and I assure you I am quite capable of sacrifice. For the present, at any rate, Estelle is only my patient and is under the care of Martha Houghton."

"Is Bocara likely to take that view?"

"Until he is convinced that his power over her is gone I do not think he will publish the fact that his wife has left him. What he will do ultimately I cannot guess."

"Endeavor to smirch her character," said Palgrave, "possibly suggest that she has caused these strange deaths and set enquiry on foot."

"That is exactly what I am afraid of," Oliver said. "It has always been in my mind. In revenge he would ruin her, even though he ruined himself at the same time. I want to be in a position to protect her, to prove beyond all doubt how innocent she is, or if that is impossible, to be able to hide her in some place where she cannot be found. For the present I am convinced Bocara will not move, we will wait until he does. And meanwhile, Palgrave, keep my secret. Do not know that Estelle has left her husband, do not know what I intend to do to try and save her from this deadly power which influences her. If the worst comes and we should end by sinning just as other men and women have done, and a censorious public holds up shocked hands, you must find the kindest excuses you can for us both."

"I should like to tell Philippa," said Palgrave.

"Very well," said Oliver, after a pause. "She is a woman and not of the ordinary run herself. She may possibly understand Estelle."

unaffected by his interview with Bruce Oliver. No sudden anger leapt within him to disturb the deliberate planning of his mind. Whatever the doctor knew about him did not trouble him, gave him no personal uneasiness. For Estelle's sake Oliver would remain silent. He was a fool this doctor, clever, but a fool. He talked like a strong man, Bocara argued to himself, talked as one who could do wrong and fear no consequences, but Western ideas were as a creed to him, and at heart he was afraid of the opinion of his fellows. When it came to the point he would be afraid to offend the world in which he lived. The thought of annulling the marriage would sink into his brain, it would appeal more and more as a way out of the difficulty, for Estelle's sake he would think of it constantly and presently he would come to Lantern House to bargain. That other fool, Palgrave, would help him to decide that to bargain was the best course, the natural way out of the difficulty. Today the offer of friendship and consideration had been rejected but presently it would be different.

So Bocara judged and prophesized to himself as he went home. Today he had failed, but presently his hour would strike and there would be no failure. And then he thought of Estelle. The thought of her brought fire into his eyes, the fire of primitive passion and desire, that unholy love which, thwarted, can hate as easily and with equal intensity. His will power was as great as ever, he would use it to the full and compel her to return, not today nor tomorrow, but when she fell again into that mental condition which rendered her receptive. That period would come. This fool of a doctor could not prevent that. She would return, and Bocara promised himself that she should return to a husband with a changed character, to a master. He gloated over this idea, and the flame of hate was in

his eyes as he entered the house and called for the two Oriental servants.

"Madame dismisses her maid," he said. "You can tell her to come to me for payment."

The men bowed.

"Madame goes away soon for an indefinite period, so the other servants are also dismissed."

"Madame is not at home," said one of the men.

"I know, that is why I bring her message. She will return when she has finished the work she is doing, then immediately she goes to other work out of England."

In a low tone both men spoke a phrase which seemed to express pleasure.

"Yes, a great work," said Bocara. "I shall have to tell you about it so that you may still serve faithfully and gain good reward. Which of you attends to the dog, Karac?"

"It is I," said one man.

"Do Madame's will, then. Bind the dog with two stout chains to the wall of his kennel, with three chains, or four if necessary, so that with all his strength he cannot break loose. The spirit of evil is in the dog and must be driven forth. It is Madame's will. Like you, I, too, in a different capacity am her servant."

The men turned to go.

"Stay," said Bocara. "Dr. Oliver will come—I cannot tell you when—but when he comes he is to be received in state."

Both men started, showing surprise, and even signs of fear.

"It is Madame's will," said Bocara again, as if the phrase were a set one and all-powerful to compel submission. "See that she is obeyed. In state, remember, whether Madame is here or not, whether I am here or not.

He can wait for Madame's coming. She will deal with one who knows not the voice of the high gods."

For a long time Bocara paced his study, thoughtfully, silently, like an evil shadow moving to and fro, and then with sudden energy, as though thoughts seared him and action were necessary, he opened the window and crossed the garden to the great Dane's kennel. The dog was bound by two stout chains and looked depressed as he lay with his head on outstretched paws, wondering, perchance, at the cause of this strange punishment. He was erect in a moment when he saw who visited him, and growling savagely, strained at his chains. Bocara's white teeth showed as he slashed the long thonged whip he had brought, almost he growled as the dog did, and looked as savage. The first blow fell and Bocara laughed at the dog's yelp, and struck again and again, harder and harder, careful to keep beyond the limits of those heavy chains. The great dog howled for a little, but the howls became savage grunts of fury as he strained and leaped against his bonds. And all the while Bocara laughed. This was Estelle's dog, beloved by her, by the wife who had left him. She would return to him—her master, he would compel her to return. With every blow he thought more of Estelle and less of the dog. Had she stood there instead of Karac it seemed unlikely that the whip's cruel work would have stopped. The man's savagery was horrible, as intense with hatred as the dog's.

"Every day until she returns," he hissed, as if the dog could understand. He was a madman in his fury. "Every day until she returns. Perhaps through you the gods will punish her and let her feel," and with one last blow he turned and left the dog still straining against the chains which bound him.

CHAPTER XII

"A man's love, if it be love like mine, is capable of any sacrifice. You can ask me nothing that I would not do to keep you happy—nothing, Estelle."

1

SET BACK in a belt of trees, with a trim lawn running down to a backwater, it would have been difficult to find a more restful spot than this cottage where Estelle Bocara had taken refuge. A day or two had served for Estelle to impress her personality upon the house. With a touch here and an alteration there a room was changed somehow and became part of a home instead of merely a room. With her money had never counted, and when Martha spoke of the cost of some alteration she looked at her in surprise. She had never understood any difficulty of this kind, and Bruce Oliver assured her there was none now.

"The Little Mother has spent her life being an angel to the poor and suffering, she forgets there are others who are not poor," was his explanation.

"But those who are not poor suffer sometimes," Estelle said vaguely.

"Oh, yes. Money helps even in suffering, but it cannot be a barrier against suffering."

Estelle said no more but the words and Oliver's manner

remained with her. She realized that her present environment was wholly at variance with everything she had known in the past. Mentally and physically it was different, and she rejoiced, as imagination may believe a Spring flower must do, which from a bulb hidden in the earth, opens shy petals to heaven's sun. She had quickly fallen in love with Nurse Houghton, as everybody did, but she was a little puzzled why a nurse should be there.

For ten days or more Bruce Oliver came and went, settling his affairs, he told her. She had not come to him a moment before he was ready, he declared in answer to her questions, but as they were unable to go abroad at once, he felt obliged to look after those patients who were depending on him, and he was also busy in making arrangements for a long absence from England. His work always took him back to town at night, he never slept at the cottage.

There was a veranda on the garden side of the cottage, a place cool and bright with flowers, wicker chairs in it, and a long, low wicker lounge on which Nurse Houghton was insistent Estelle should spend many hours of the day resting. Bruce had said she needed rest, so she obeyed, but she felt perfectly well. How could she be ill when she felt so happy. She was puzzled and waited patiently for Bruce to explain. She was sure there was something to explain, indeed, she thought he had been on the point of telling her on more than one occasion.

She was lying on the lounge one afternoon, Bruce in a chair beside her, her hand in his. They had been silent for a little while.

"Asleep?" he asked.

"No."

"Quite happy and comfortable!"

"Quite. Yes, quite happy, except that I wish you

wouldn't go away. I shall not feel quite happy until you are with me always, until we are alone, until——”

“I know, dear heart. You are wondering why the Little Mother remains, and why I go away, and this dear little head of yours is troubled about it.”

“Is that wonderful?” she asked. “Do you really think I am ill, Bruce?”

“Yes, in a way you are, in a peculiar way, and I am very, very anxious to make you quite well. I have been talking to another doctor about you, and I am going to bring him to see you.”

“Tell me, Bruce. I am not frightened.”

Very tenderly he told her enough of his theory to make her understand. He did not tell her what he believed her work had been during her periods of detachment, but he emphasized his belief that Bocara had obtained a greater power over her than she had imagined, that she had often seen evil because he had been able to suggest to her that evil was there to see.

“Do you mean that he has been able to lead me to mistake good for evil?” she asked.

“Sometimes, yes. You were conscious of it yourself, perhaps for the first time, that day I came to you in the little temple, brought there by a letter the Professor had written, or had caused you to write.”

“His power has gone, Bruce.”

“I am not quite sure of that, dear,” Oliver answered. “It is weakened, very much less than it was, but I do not think it is destroyed altogether. I want to do away with it entirely.”

“Can you?”

“I believe so. I have been watching you closely, so has the Little Mother—that is why she is here. You see, dearest, the fact that you are not like other women, that

you have grown up apart, as it were, that there are times when you drift back into a mist of cloud, all these things suggest an abnormal condition which means that you are not in a perfect state of health. Partly it is accounted for by your upbringing which has developed you along certain lines, but I am convinced that a physical reason exists which makes this mental condition possible. I could worry you with all kinds of medical terms and phrases," he went on carelessly, anxious that she should not detect that he looked upon her condition as serious, "but in plain language it amounts to this: I believe when you received that blow at the time of your parents' death you sustained an injury to your head, and that it was this injury which enabled Bocara to establish his ascendancy over you in the first place."

"I do not think that can explain everything, Bruce."

"My dear, it is astonishing what huge trouble can come from a very small injury."

"My injury is small, then?"

"Yes."

"And how are you going to alter it?" she asked.

"Quite easily, I hope," said Oliver, bending over her. "This dear little head, so lovely, so perfect to look at, has, I believe, a flaw within, a bone splintered by that savage blow. This splinter causes a pressure on the brain, and under certain conditions brings unconsciousness, or semi-unconsciousness, when to some extent at any rate you are at the mercy of outside influence and suggestion."

"And I should not know whether it was good or bad!"

"You would be an unconscious tool either for one or the other."

She shook her head slowly.

"You do not quite understand, Bruce. I have always had the sensation of working for good."

"Exactly. Evil has been suggested to you as good. You were not free to choose. Now, if that splinter is removed I believe you will be always and entirely free."

"An operation?" she asked.

"Yes, if after seeing you, this other doctor agrees with me."

"He would operate?"

"No, I should do it myself. I would not let anyone else touch you."

"You would just send me to sleep and presently I should awake again and be—Bruce, should I be a different woman?"

"No, dear."

"Are you quite sure of that?"

"I believe you will be just your own sweet self, full of goodness and truth and love. Perhaps in one way you may not feel so close to the high gods as you have done, you may never again want a little temple to worship in with its image and incense and golden chains, but the true essence of your faith will not be altered. It is my belief that you have learned truth and had wide vision in spite of Bocara's suggestions, altogether apart from him, but at the same time he has been able to use your gift, your blessing, for some selfish purpose of his own. I believe he has really held you back, that he has succeeded in dwarfing your vision and narrowing it into ruts of his own making. You will be as a caged bird set wholly free, you will be yourself, free from those bonds which have held you to something far less than your real self."

"You make a very wonderful woman of me, Bruce."

"So wonderful, dear, that I am sometimes afraid lest you should see how commonplace and unworthy I am. And yet that is not quite true," he went on. "We are not quite ordinary, either of us, we are adventurers, among

those glorious fools at whom the world laughs because it does not understand."

"I think I have been more like an ordinary woman since I loved you, Bruce, since I saw you, since out of time and space we met, destiny guiding us. Pressure on the brain, you say. It is a strange thing, the brain."

"Yes, dear."

"Even doctors are still learning about it—"

"Yes."

"Bruce, if you touch mine it might alter me altogether. You say it won't, but it might, mightn't it? Is it possible that I could wake up and forget you?"

"My dear, has not inevitable destiny brought us to this hour?"

"I am a little afraid," she whispered. "I would rather be as I am and have you, even if at times I should drift back into my thin cloud, than be without you. Life without you is—is unthinkable."

"That will not be, my darling."

"But it might, it might; you cannot know everything. The high gods may trick us, even as I believe they tried to trick me that day you came to the little temple. Bruce, come closer to me," and she put her arms round his neck and drew him down to her. "Bruce, if I wake not knowing that you are part of me, if I wake a different person, a different me, will you put me to rest altogether? Will you give me just one sharp prick which shall let life out, which shall set me free to wait for you on some other plain? Will you promise?"

It was a contingency he had thought of, yet with her in his arms he hesitated.

"Yes, I promise," he said firmly, after a pause. "And there shall be no waiting. I shall never let you go alone."

"And if I should not wake, Bruce, but just sleep into death and the life beyond?"

"Still you should not travel the journey alone," he answered. "Life without you is impossible. But you are going to live, Estelle, you are going to live. We grow morbid, and the whole world is happy. Look at it. Sunlight and cool shade on the stream yonder, long, tranquil shadows on the lawn, and that bird singing from the wood, and the hum of the bees at their work, and those two white butterflies by the border there, lovers surely."

"Yes, dear Bruce, and listen to the sound of the weir——"

"Like distant laughter, Estelle."

"Yes, yes and no. It is laughter but with some sadness in it. When butterflies and flowers have gone, and birds are silent, there will still be that sound of ever-falling water telling us that life is never ending, always going on and on. And yet, dear, I am so much a woman that the eternity of life frightens me a little. I want to live and have love, your love, here and now. I wish you would not go away any more. Need you?"

"For a little while yet, dear, it is necessary. You must be my patient first, and then——"

He slipped to his knees beside her couch and she held him close to her heart.

2

The room which Oliver had examined so carefully when he first went to the cottage had been fitted for the operation and to serve as a ward. Neither Oliver nor Nurse Houghton had ever before expended such care upon a patient. Everything necessary, and things which could only become necessary in the most unexpected circumstances, had been provided. All that love and tender service and money could do had been done.

The arrival at the cottage of Dr. Smith, the man who

had lent him the phial of serpent poison, did him good. He was a parchment-skinned individual with few graces either in speech or manner, but he was a man of deep understanding. Oliver really wanted no other opinion, and this man had no advice to give. Oliver knew far more about a case of this kind than he did, his special study had been on different lines altogether, but he thoroughly understood Oliver's position. He had sympathy to give, and he gave it the more readily after he had seen Estelle. He was a tower of strength to Oliver at such a time as this.

"I see no reason why she should not come through the operation safely," he said, after considering the whole question in detail and after hearing Oliver's story of Estelle's life. "Of course, there must be a certain amount of danger in such a case, there always is, but she is strong and physically, absolutely healthy. I have never seen a more exquisite specimen of beautiful womanhood."

"Yes, physically she is perfect, but mentally——"

"Her mental condition is your affair, Oliver, not mine."

"It adds to the danger. There is always the unknown factor," said Oliver. "I am thinking of some change, not of death."

"You are a bit strung up," Dr. Smith answered. "To me she appears an ordinary, normal woman."

"You see nothing strange about her?"

"Only that she seems to regard me as quite a pleasant person; women don't, as a rule."

"That is probably because you never supply a sugar coating to the pill of truth."

"Or in plain language, because I have no manners. Well, Oliver, your—your friend is delightful to me. I have tumbled into love for the first time in my life."

"Estelle looks into the heart of a man and judges him as he really is," said Oliver.

Smith regarded him quizzically for a few moments in silence.

"May be, yet I cannot conceive that looking into my heart would compel her favor. The fact remains, however, that she has set new life running through this half mummified carcass of mine. You are a fortunate man, Oliver."

"I know that."

"And you will grow old, my friend, which she never will. The fluid of eternal youth is in her veins. It is good to know her, it is good to be loved by her, it is—Oliver, the world is well lost for such love as hers."

3

On the morning of the chosen day Oliver went early to Estelle's room. He had not told her he should do so, he had not intended to go, but on waking he had felt impelled to dress quickly and be with her for a little while at this early hour of this momentous day. He knocked at her door, and when told to enter stood spellbound on the threshold.

Never until this moment had he fully realized her surpassing loveliness. She had sat up in bed, beauty in its daintiest setting. Her pose suggested that she had nearly slipped from bed to welcome him. The lace on her filmy nightgown had fallen apart at her throat just revealing the curve of her breast, her hair fell in a glory about her, her eyes sparkled with the light of love and of the morning, and as she held out her arms to him the sleeves of her gown fell back and left them bare almost to the shoulder.

"Bruce!"

"My darling, did I wake you?"

"No. I think the first bird calling to its mate across the garden woke me."

"I had to come," he said, closing the door and going towards her.

"I dreamt you would come to me quite early, just my dear lover, to be with me alone for a little while."

"You must have called to me, Estelle, and my soul heard you."

"Just my lover," she whispered. "Presently you must be only the doctor, and I shall not see you then. I shall not know that they are your dear hands which touch me. And you will have to forget that you are my lover."

"That is impossible."

"Oh, but you must. Sit here, Bruce, on my bed. You will have to forget for a little while or love would surely make you nervous, a little nervous, wouldn't it, just because it is I who am your patient?"

"It is love which gives me courage," he answered.

"When you first said I was ill, that an operation would be necessary, I thought you meant that someone else would do it. It would be so as a rule, wouldn't it, Bruce? A doctor does not generally operate on his—on the woman who is dearest to him in all the world, does he?"

"I could not let anyone else touch you, dear."

"And I could not allow it," she answered. "You are my only doctor. Even your friend, your ugly, nice friend, must do only what is absolutely necessary to help you, no more," and she nestled her head against his shoulder, looking strangely young, little more than a girl.

"He shall do no more than that," Oliver promised.

"But now, now you are only my lover. And, dearest, there was something I wanted to ask you. Many times I have intended to ask you, but you seem to have been with me so few and such short hours that I have only had time

to talk of love in them. Do you think it would be possible to have Karac here when I am better? The dog loves me."

"Of course, darling. I ought to have thought of him before."

"I thought I heard him crying for me in the night," she said. "I was dreaming."

"He shall come, dear," said Oliver, thinking nothing of the difficulty there might be in getting him from Lantern House.

"Bruce, dear, I think this is the most beautiful hour I have ever known," she whispered. "You are nearer to me, more mine, than you have ever been before. I feel that you are mine, body and soul. I feel the glory of possession. Perhaps it because we are here, alone in my room, where no one, no man has ever come before. But it is you, you who are a part of me, and it is all so right, so natural."

"My darling, I wish I could talk as a lover ought to be able to talk," Oliver said, "but I cannot. I can talk well enough about most things, but in love I have no gift of speech. I only know you are my whole world, more than all life here or hereafter. I look at you and can find no words to tell you what is in my heart. I can only hold your hand and dumbly worship."

"Not worship, Bruce, I want love, love. Take me in your arms and try and tell me something of how you love me. Hold me close, very close to you. Even if you hurt me I shall not mind, and I shall not cry out. I think there must always be pain in love, exquisite pain."

"I love you," he said, holding her close to him and kissing her lips and throat. "I love you. Once again I am in a sanctuary of yours, and I love and worship."

"It is a woman in your arms, Bruce, a real, loving woman."

"It must be love and worship that I give," he said.

"And just now I only seem to want love," she answered.
"God keep you always, Estelle, my love, my—my wife."

4

The operation was over. It had proved more serious than Oliver had anticipated, and for a day or two life and death hung evenly in the scales. It was Nurse Houghton's skill which tipped the balance and restored to Oliver the hope which he had nearly lost.

There came a day when it was certain that Death had been cheated of his prey, but still there might be change. She had not reacted as Oliver expected, nor as Dr. Smith had anticipated she would do. Her splendid physical health had not stood the strain as it should have done. She looked conscious but recognized no one about her. Often she lay with her eyes closed and might have been asleep, but at other times her eyes were open, a strange look in them, not a troubled look exactly, but rather negative. There seemed to be no mental strength at all. She was like a beautiful casket, empty.

For long hours Oliver sat beside her watching her, and it required all Dr. Smith's persuasion to induce him to rest and allow him to take his place.

"The moment there is the least sign of change I will send for you, Oliver. Get what rest you can. You may need all your strength later."

"You are afraid that——"

"Only that you will be on my hands if you do not take care of yourself."

"Very well, I will go and rest for an hour or two. You know how thoroughly I trust your skill, and how I thank God you are here with me, but I am persuaded that it is important that I should be beside her at the moment she comes to herself."

"I will send for you. There will be preliminary signs."

"I am not sure. I think it will come suddenly, and I want to see exactly how it does come. I am convinced there is significance in every movement she makes."

However, Oliver was persuaded to rest, and on the third occasion was exhausted enough to sleep for many hours. Dr. Smith had a long vigil, and it was after this that he questioned Oliver closely. He had taken very careful note of his patient and had asked Nurse Houghton a lot of questions.

"There is some factor not accounted for, Oliver," he said decidedly. "Can you suggest what it is?"

"Do you mean there is a deeper seated injury than I imagined?"

"No. I think the operation has entirely justified your theory," was the answer. "The splinter was there, exactly where you expected to find it, it has been removed quite successfully, and I cannot conceive why her brain should remain cloudy so long. I expected a comatose period of longer duration than you appeared to do, but her present state I do not understand. That is why I suggest some outside factor. She talked a little last night. Nurse Houghton tells me she does so at times."

"But nothing coherent," said Oliver.

"Nothing. To be quite candid, Oliver, I have supposed your history of her has been on the imaginative side, biased to some extent by the position in which you have found yourself. Now I am inclined to accept your story as fundamentally true, and to look upon our patient as a woman mentally extraordinary. There is no reason so far as I can see why she should remain in this comatose condition so long. Obviously she is improving physically. At first I speculated whether in some way the operation might not have injured her brain, but I do not think this is the case,

therefore I suggest some outside factor. What is it, Oliver?"

"Is it possible that Bocara has been able to exert an influence over her?" said Oliver.

"It does not seem likely, yet——"

"As I told you, he declared he would be able to make her return to him."

"But she has not mentioned his name, nor his house, nor anything about him, except Karac, the dog."

"There is a reason why she should mention the dog," said Oliver. "We have recently talked about the dog. I had promised to get him for her if I could."

"If this man Bocara were influencing her in any way I think she would mention him in her wandering talk," Dr. Smith returned.

"Is that so certain?" said Oliver. "I have had some influence with her, but she has not mentioned me. Yesterday while I sat beside her she hardly looked at me, and when she did there was not a vestige of recognition in her eyes."

Possibly Oliver's anxiety blinded his vision somewhat, for when a little later Nurse Houghton suggested an explanation he wondered that he had not thought of it.

"Accepting your explanation of her, Dr. Oliver, it seems to me her condition is not altogether astonishing," Martha Houghton said when both doctors asked her opinion. "You say her receptiveness is periodic and mainly consequent on a recurrent memory of a great shock coming to her in certain circumstances. May not that period have come now, either from memory of the old shock, or more probably from the shock of the operation? To a mind such as you believe hers to be, the shock might be much greater than to an ordinary person."

"Yes, Little Mother, go on."

"If, then, this Professor has power to influence her, she is in a condition to be especially susceptible, and in her weakened condition it is having an effect upon her for which you cannot account."

"That sounds a reasonable theory," said Dr. Smith.
"It would stand for the outside factor."

"But she doesn't talk about Bocara," said Oliver.

"Nor about you," said Nurse Houghton. "She constantly mentions the dog, Karac, but for the rest she talks of nothing definitely nor with any persistency. To my mind that is a good sign. Even in her weakened condition the influence is not catching hold of her, and will grow less and less as she becomes stronger. Physically she is decidedly better and is gaining strength every day."

"I believe you are right," said Oliver rather excitedly.
"Little Mother, you have been a dear good friend to me,
and now you add to my indebtedness by giving me the
best hope I have had for days past."

Two days later Oliver was sitting by Estelle's bedside watching her. It had been impossible to induce him to stay away from her for more than an hour at a time. She was certainly better. When she moved her limbs it was more strongly, and a little color had come into her cheeks. Presently she looked at him, not a mere glance which was all she had given him until now. This was a steady look.

"Estelle!" he whispered, bending close to her.

She turned away and looked at her own hand grasping the coverlet. Then in a little while she looked at him again.

"Estelle, dear heart."

This time she did not look away. She appeared to listen.

"My darling," he said, still bending close to her.
She raised her hand and touched his face.

"Bruce!" she said after a pause.
It was the beginning of her convalescence.

5

Estelle improved rapidly. Healthy color came back to her cheeks; she began to talk to Oliver in her old sweet way. At least in her love she had not changed, and yet there was a change in her. Outside her love, outside her immediate surroundings, she seemed to have no interests. She did not even ask after Dr. Smith who had now left the cottage.

She was lying on the wicker lounge on the veranda one afternoon. She had fallen asleep while Oliver sat beside her, and he had gone indoors to write some letters. She roused suddenly and looked at the empty chair beside her.

"Bruce!"

He came through the open window quickly at her call.

"Not a long sleep this afternoon," he said as he bent down to kiss her. "I am not sure I ought not a scold you for waking so soon. I am sure Martha Houghton would."

"I feel better than I have yet," she answered. "I feel much more alive, and for the first time really want to be up and doing things. Soon I shall be again the woman you could not help falling in love with. Sometimes you must have wondered whether I should ever be quite that woman again."

"Of course I haven't," he answered.

"I tell you I am much better and you cannot deceive me any longer. You have been terribly anxious. It shows in your face, there are such deep lines for my love to smooth away."

"We want a long rest, you and I, Estelle. Shall it be

here or abroad? I have made preliminary arrangements for going abroad."

"Where?"

"To Italy."

"I should like that. I want to get away from the old life and be just alone with you," and then, after a pause, she went on: "Have you heard anything of Professor Bocara?"

"Nothing. Why?" and he looked at her keenly. It was the first time she had mentioned the Professor's name.

"He just came into my mind, while I was sleeping I think," and she held out her hand. "Help me, Bruce, I want to sit up. You know, dear, I am changed in a way," she went on when he had made her comfortable with cushions. "Now that I am better I feel that I am changed. I seem to have had a long dream. Did I ask you to let Karac come here or was that part of my dream?"

"You asked me, and I promised to get him, but my thoughts have been so occupied with you that I have not been able to think of Karac. I will try and get him for you when next I go to town."

"Of course, it doesn't really matter, but I should like to have the dog. He has been strangely in my dreams, as if he had thought of me, and I had somehow understood. I have dreamed of a multitude of vague things and ideas, curious ideas through which I had to struggle, just as one who is thirsty pushes through the high reeds on a river bank to get to the water. I was thirsty for something yet at first I did not know what I thirsted for. It was to be with you, Bruce. It is strange, but for a long time I do not seem to have remembered the Professor at all, and now that I do he is nothing to me. I cannot even hate him as I believe I ought to do. He simply does not count at all. It is just as if he had never been."

"I am very glad, very thankful," said Oliver.

"It is what you expected would happen, isn't it?"

"What I hoped and prayed would happen."

"Then—then you have prayed more than you used to do."

"Yes, haltingly but very, very really."

She pressed his arm for a moment.

"So you understand why I am a different woman. There is no Professor in my life. I suppose he must have had some power over me because I feel as if I had been tied with cords which have now been cut. And that power must have been evil because I feel so curiously free. I feel only good about me, no evil. Yet I do not feel that my real vision is obscured. I see as clearly as ever, but there does not appear to be any evil near me to destroy."

"I think I understand, dear."

She was the same yet not the same. She still saw her mission clearly, that mission which is for all, to struggle against evil, but she was free to judge for herself. It would be a judgment all her own, untrammelled by any laws which it had suited men to make for their own purpose, laws often unsound and selfish. She would deal with fundamentals, not with the surface of things.

"The Professor is my husband, Bruce," she said, putting her arm through his, "and I have run away from him. It is curious, but with my new freedom, my mental freedom I mean, I can better appreciate the world's attitude and all you have said about it. Then it did not seem to matter, now—now I can face it as a woman, just as you have had to face it as a man. I think it must have been very hard for you, Bruce."

"Believe me, dearest, I have only thought of you."

"He could divorce me, Bruce, couldn't he?"

"Yes, or it is possible the marriage might be annulled."

"And then we could be married?"

"Yes."

She was thoughtful for a few moments.

"It is troubling me, Bruce. I have been thinking of little else."

"Listen to me, dear," said Oliver very quietly. "I want you to understand exactly what I mean. I want you to know that you are absolutely free, as free as a young girl to say yea or nay to her lover. A man's love, if it be love like mine, is capable of any sacrifice. You can ask me nothing that I would not do to keep you safe and happy —nothing, Estelle. Do you understand?"

"I understand that you have thought only of me, now I am strong again I have got to think of you."

"You do not understand, Estelle."

"Yes I do, dear," she answered, laying her head against his shoulder. "I do not think we shall be married. Losing his hold over me in one way the Professor will try and punish me in another. He will not set me free, he will not do anything to aid to my happiness. It will not matter at all to me, Bruce. To you—will you mind very much?"

"For myself not a bit."

"I am thinking of you," she persisted. "Your position, your career."

"They do not count, but you—it means so much more to a woman. I love you enough to leave you if that would bring you peace."

"It wouldn't," she answered. "I tell you, Bruce, it does not affect me. I shall be yours, body and soul, only we shall not be married. I think our love will be more beautiful, more sacred, than are many marriages."

"It will, darling."

"Some people will not like us, I suppose."

"I think they will be the kind of people we do not want to know," Oliver answered.

"And one or two we should like to keep as friends," she answered. "Oh, yes, there will be one or two like that, and you know it, Bruce. Many nice people like made-up truth better than the real thing. I wonder whether it will make any difference to Philippa Dealytry?"

"I do not think it will," said Oliver. "Shall we put her to the test and ask her to come and see you here?"

"In a few days, why not? I will write to her. I shall tell her quite plainly, Bruce, that you and I are going to be man and wife. There is no shame in it."

"None," he answered.

"And I shall sign myself Estelle Oliver. Am I not yours from now, forever, here and into the beyond?"

"My darling, delightful wife. God has been very good to me."

"For your sake, Bruce, I should like to be married to you. I shall cost you some friends I fear, but in Italy—yes, it will be best to leave England—in Italy my love shall make you forget you have lost anything."

"Lost!" said Oliver. "You are my world. You are mine, and in you is my full desire in this life, and my hope for the life to come. Love and worship, both are yours, Estelle, love for the beautiful woman who gives herself to me wholly unworthy though I be, worship for the soul of goodness that is in you which shall lead me upwards to higher things, better ideals, and touch me with divine fire. Lost! Estelle. I have gained everything worth having. I have love, and I have found my own soul."

CHAPTER XIII

"Too much license is an evil, no doubt, but hard and fast rules cause a lot of confusion. So many sheep get into the wrong fold."

1

BRUCE OLIVER had a busy day before him. He had arranged not to go to the cottage until the following day, telling Estelle that he would be engaged in settling about their journey to Italy.

As a fact, these arrangements were almost complete already. Oliver had offered his services to the Italian Government, and his own fame, together with the glowing accounts concerning him which Dr. Smith had written to influential men of his acquaintance in Rome, had made the Italian Government only too ready to jump at his offer. Now that Estelle was fit to travel he was anxious to get her away as soon as possible. She required an entire change of environment to complete her cure. In Italy a new life waited them. They would be man and wife, true mates. Awkward moments might possibly come in the future; somebody might discover that neither Church nor registry office had had a hand in their marriage, but such moments would pass, and because of their love and trust in each other, because of the inevitable destiny which had bound them together, no sting would remain. They must do without the friendship of those people who could not understand, who would not accept them as they were.

Oliver felt this to be the only way of facing things squarely, and yet he was not altogether satisfied; indeed, the attitude which people might take towards Estelle troubled him exceedingly. He was anxious to know what course Philippa Dealtry would take with regard to the letter of invitation which he had posted as he left the cottage last night. It was in the nature of an experiment—a test. A visit from Philippa would help Estelle a great deal, and Oliver was uncertain what Philippa would do. Her mother would probably try and persuade her not to go. Lady Dealtry was one of those who are quite ready to be lenient to sinners in the abstract, but are puritans to the marrow when their own circle is touched.

Oliver's explanation that he would be busy over the Italian journey was an excuse. He could not tell Estelle what really kept him in town today. He had an appointment with a high official at the Home Office, a man he knew well, a man who appreciated his worth, and to him Oliver had decided to tell Estelle's history. He had not come to this consideration without grave thought, but so confident was he that Bocara would make mischief the moment he had to admit failure that Oliver determined to be first in the field. Bocara would be unlikely to stop at any lie which would further his purpose, so it was well someone in authority should know the true story.

Friendship is one thing, duty is another, and authority declined to make definite promises. After all, Oliver might be mistaken, it was contended, he had no real evidence against the Professor Bocara, no evidence at all that any jury would accept for a moment. His story was interesting, it might be substantially true, but the majority of people would want a lot of proof before they believed it.

"Neither is it evidence against the woman," Oliver argued.

"Quite true," was the answer. "At present no accusation has been made against her."

"But it will," said Oliver, "at least I am afraid it will. I was anxious to tell the true story to someone in authority before Bocara circulates his lies. He is not likely to strike openly. Now that you have listened to me I am easier."

Oliver was advised to keep his own counsel and not go out to meet trouble. There had been no breath of suspicion either against Bocara or against his wife. Should there be, authority would be obliged to act, but Dr. Oliver might rest assured that until then his story would be treated as confidential, and, if action became necessary, authority would do all it possibly could for him.

With this Bruce Oliver had to be content. He had at least prepared the ground for eventualities, and he had not expected to be able to do much more. At the moment his friend at the Home Office was not in the least convinced that his story was true, but he would certainly take another view of it if the day of necessity came. It probably would come, and he must gradually prepare Estelle for it. She would grow strong in Italy and would be able to bear the knowledge of what she had done in her periods of detachment. She would understand her own innocence and that would give her strength. Oliver wished he could do more, but at least he had done what he could to protect her in the future. The fate of both of them lay in the hands of Time.

2

Before leaving home that morning Oliver had telephoned to Gerald Palgrave, and on returning to Hobart Place he found him waiting in the study. Oliver had not seen him since the operation, but he had written to him twice, once when success seemed doubtful, and once since Estelle's convalescence. Now Oliver had to give him details.

"And you are persuaded that Bocara was able to exert an influence over her?" Palgrave asked.

"Yes. He succeeded in retarding her recovery, but he was unable to draw her back."

"It seems hardly possible."

"The fact is, Palgrave, we do not give enough thought to the powers which surround us. We talk of life after death, we talk of the spiritual world, our religion is full of the magnitude of the unseen in comparison with the seen, and yet we are seldom prepared to believe anything we do not understand. Physically we can use force against each other, why should we not be able to do so mentally? The real marvel would be if we could not. I have increased in wisdom since I came in contact with Estelle Bocara."

"I suppose the flesh really makes us blind," said Palgrave.

"That is exactly what religion is always trying to teach us, but we are dull scholars," said Oliver. "Have you told Philippa all about Estelle and myself?"

"Yes. She took it very quietly."

"And was not very shocked?"

"My dear Oliver, I really don't know. There are two sides to Phil. On one side she is as transparent as a pool of spring water, all the pebbles clearly visible at the bottom. On the other side she—she——"

"Don't say muddy for the sake of keeping to the metaphor. The word would not describe her at all."

"She is black and obscure from depth," said Palgrave. "I mean it. She did not strafe me for defending your action, and even when she tumbled to the fact that I was a party to the affair in a sense, she showed no indignation. So I argue for the best."

"Estelle wrote to her last night, asking her to go and see her," said Oliver.

"At your instigation?"

"Estelle wondered whether Philippa would feel any different towards her and I suggested she should write to her. Do you think Philippa will go?"

"Can't say, Oliver."

"I am not asking you to persuade her."

"It wouldn't be any good if you did; a decision of that kind must be left to her. In legal language, Oliver, I suppose this is a kind of test case?"

"I admit I am desperately anxious that Estelle could not be deserted by all her old friends, and she is very fond of Philippa. You see, Palgrave, she is in some ways more a woman than she was. There is no difference in her attitude towards me, as between us love is right and natural whatever the law may have to say about it; but being more a woman than she was, she has more need of a woman's sympathy. She has not said anything of the kind but I know it."

"And it is worrying you. You look it."

"I am not a bit worried in the way you imagine. In one sense you could not find a happier man than I am. I am tired. The strain has been heavy."

"Does Madame know that you believe she is responsible for these deaths?" Palgrave asked after a pause.

"No. I want to be out of the country before the facts are known. Whatever happens then it will be easier for Estelle. As I told you in my last letter, I have offered my services to the Italian Government and they have been accepted. Practically all my arrangements are now complete, but the date of our departure is not yet fixed."

"Bocara has not moved in any way, then?"

"Apparently not. He may not yet be satisfied that his power over Estelle is gone. I do not know how the effect of her resistance would affect him, whether he would know

at once that he had failed or not. I have neither seen nor heard anything of him since the morning he was in this room. Have you?"

"No."

"Today I have done what I can to forestall any story he may tell," said Oliver. "I have a personal friend very highly placed at the Home Office, I have had an interview with him and told him the whole story. Of course, I do not expect to avoid publicity if Bocara elects to be revengeful, but at least the sting will be taken out of his lies."

"It is rather a bold move on your part, Oliver. I should have been afraid of its precipitating matters."

"It will not do that, I can trust my man. I do not think any real suffering comes from telling the truth."

"I once got whacked for telling it at school," Palgrave returned.

"Real suffering, I said. One does not really suffer if one's conscience is clear, there is a joy in it because special strength is given to endure. Were it not so, mere men of flesh and blood could not stand what many of them do for the sake of truth and justice."

"I do not think I am yet prepared for such a high plane of thought, Oliver. Did this friend of yours at the Home Office believe your story?"

"Not altogether, I fancy. Possibly he thinks I am a little overwrought, a little mad, perchance, but if everything has to come out, if Bocara's past has to be closely enquired into, he will take a different view of it. My transparent honesty will be remembered and will bear fruit. The official mind is like that, and it is upon the official mind I am depending rather than upon friendship. It may be that Bocara will remain silent."

Palgrave shook his head doubtfully.

"I am not very hopeful," Oliver admitted, "but you never can tell what a man will do when he thinks his own skin is in danger. Perhaps I shall be able to find out."

"How?"

"I am going to call upon him this evening."

"Whatever for?"

"To ask him for a dog Estelle is fond of."

"It is folly, madness, Oliver. The man is dangerous. I saw that the day he came here."

"I shall carry a serviceable revolver."

"I shall go with you," said Palgrave.

"You will do nothing of the kind. Two of us might frighten him. He is much more likely to be communicative if I have him alone."

"It is dangerous, Oliver. Does Madame know the risk you are running?"

"I didn't mention any difficulty to her. I just promised to get the dog if I could."

"I wouldn't run such a risk for a dog."

"You would if you were me and Estelle had asked you," said Oliver with a smile. "Don't you worry about me. I shall be safe with a revolver in my pocket and with the talisman which I wear about my neck."

"Surely——"

"Yes, I believe in it. Estelle gave it me some time ago, and I have every reason to believe in it. I am convinced it has shielded me already. I am physically and spiritually armed."

"I do not like the business."

"If it will ease your mind I will call in at your chambers on my way back to show you I am all right. I hope to have the dog with me."

"I promised to go in and see Philippa after dinner, but——"

"I will wait for you at your chambers," Oliver returned. "I shall be glad to know what Philippa is going to do about Estelle's letter. I shall be all right, I am sure of it. I tell you this, Palgrave, had I to leave one of my weapons of defence at home, I should leave the revolver. That will show you the faith that is in me."

"Madness," said Palgrave.

"No, faith," Oliver answered with a definiteness which was almost startling.

3

Philippa read the letters which had come for her by the evening post. She and her mother were in the drawing room, having left Sir Charles to enjoy his after-dinner cigar. One letter she read carefully a second time, then passed it to Lady Dealtry.

"You were talking about Dr. Oliver and the Bocaras when Mrs. Falconer was here yesterday, mother; that letter will interest you, and Mrs. Falconer, too. She was very speculative, and as it happens she was not very far from the truth."

Lady Dealtry read it carelessly, then sat up straight in her chair and read it again.

"Estelle Oliver!" she exclaimed.

"She makes the situation perfectly plain, doesn't she?" Philippa said. "You will be able to give definite information the next time you see Mrs. Falconer. Estelle does not suggest that she desires secrecy."

"Of course you will not go and see her, Philippa."

"Of course I shall, mother."

"But, my dear——"

"You are really quite quaint, mother. The situation is not unlike the one in your book, and your perfectly nice heroine does just what I contemplate doing. You were

wholly on the side of the sinners when you wrote the book, and frankly I was rather shocked at your attitude then. We seem to have changed places."

"Surely you do not agree with what she is doing or going to do?" said Lady Dealtry.

"No, I am not going to label myself to that extent, but I confess to being a halter between two opinions. In real life as well as in novels I think one's viewpoint must depend to a large extent upon the people with whom you are dealing. There are exceptional circumstances in this case and they must be taken into account. You cannot reasonably make a cut and dried law and fit every case into it."

"You do not even seem surprised at the information in this letter, Philippa."

"As a matter of fact the letter does not come as a surprise to me. Bruce Oliver took Gerald into his confidence and Gerald had his permission to tell me. The doctor appeared to think I should sympathize and get some way towards comprehension."

"I do not know he should get such an idea into his head," said Lady Dealtry, in a manner which suggested some annoyance at having been kept in the dark herself, "and I am very surprised that Gerald should have discussed the question with you."

"Young people do not shy at such discussions today, mother. We have all become horribly modern. I am not saying that our modernity is altogether attractive, but one has to go with the tide."

"Of course I cannot prevent your going to see her, Philippa, but your visit must not be taken to carry my approval, as any indication that I agree with her action. I most emphatically do not."

"Yet Professor Bocara is rather an impossible person, mother, and I assure you the case is peculiar. I am not

at liberty to speak quite plainly but this is not a common intrigue. It is not one of those sordid affairs which one reads of in the papers and tries to forget. Estelle says she is different from other women, but——”

“My dear, that is the plea of every woman who kicks over the traces,” said Lady Dealtry.

“Estelle does not mean it in that sense,” said Philippa. “She never has been quite normal, and she has undergone an operation. Dr. Oliver performed it himself.”

“An operation!”

“Yes, the removal of some splinter of bone pressing on the brain, the result of a blow she received when she was a child. Bruce Oliver wrote and told Gerald the operation had been successful. That is what Estelle means when she says she is a different woman.”

“Such an elaborate excuse is original, at any rate,” said Lady Dealtry, “but it is hardly excuse enough for running away from her husband.”

“I do not think she is trying to make any excuse,” said Philippa. “The operation was a very serious one and meant going down into the shadow of death. It wanted courage to take the risk, and Estelle certainly did not run that risk to justify herself to the world. It wanted some courage on Bruce Oliver’s part, too.”

Just then Sir Charles came into the room, followed by Gerald Palgrave, and Lady Dealtry immediately put the case to her husband.

“I have only just this moment arrived,” said Palgrave to Philippa. “Sir Charles was crossing the hall as I was let in. You have heard from Estelle Bocara, then.”

“Yes. You shall see the letter in a moment.”

“I saw Oliver this afternoon. He told me she had written.”

“Read the letter, father, and then let Gerald see it.”

"She signs herself Estelle Oliver," said Lady Dealtry.

"It is in her anxiety to be quite honest with us," said Philippa.

"I tell Philippa she ought not to go, Charles. She may take more notice of you if you endorse my opinion."

"That is most unlikely, my dear," said Sir Charles, putting on his glasses to read the letter.

"I have told her that we disassociate ourselves entirely from her action," Lady Dealtry went on, "and if I were Gerald I should exert my authority and forbid her to go."

"Have I got any authority?"

"You are not the first man who has come up against that question," said Sir Charles, handing him the letter when he had read it. "Speaking from general experience and from my special knowledge of Phil, I should say not."

"Is that quite fair?" said Lady Dealtry. "Have I ever done anything with which you have thoroughly disagreed, Charles?"

"Long ago, perhaps, and I have forgotten it. Perhaps I hadn't even the courage to mention it at the time," and he put his hand on her shoulder. "We are growing older, you know, and it may be we grow a little old-fashioned, too."

"With regard to Madame Bocara," Sir Charles went on, "I imagine she has looked at life always from a peculiar angle, and not having viewed life from that particular angle I cannot tell how it looks. I am, therefore, unable to pass judgment upon her. She may have some excuse for her actions, but Oliver ruins his career. It is rather hard to feel sympathetic towards a man who deliberately does that."

"Pity would be wasted on him," said Palgrave.

"I have no pity for a man who deliberately ruins his position," returned Sir Charles.

"If you had talked to Oliver I think you would find some sympathy for him," said Palgrave. "As a matter of fact, his position does not worry him in the least, but the woman's does. It isn't an ordinary case of infatuation with either of them. I began by believing it was, and offered the usual advice. I quickly realized that a stereotyped attitude did not fit this case at all. At present there is a great deal I may not tell, if I could I am sure Oliver would have your sympathy, Sir Charles, and Madame Boeara, too."

"My dear Gerald, one has to draw thick and definite lines or there would be no law and order in the world," said Lady Dealtry.

"You can draw them too thick and definite," Palgrave answered. "Too much license is an evil, no doubt, but hard and fast rules cause a lot of confusion. So many sheep get into the wrong fold."

"In a bustling world it isn't possible to judge each case on its merits," said Sir Charles.

"Absolutely impossible," Lady Dealtry agreed.

"Difficult, but not impossible, I think," said Palgrave. "It is at least an ideal we should try and approach. This is a case for special consideration, and I assure you there is much to be said for Oliver's point of view. I am sorry I cannot give you the full facts, but Oliver made me promise to tell no one but Philippa at present."

"And it is because I do understand that I am going to see Estelle, mother. You must not be annoyed with me."

"You will probably get yourself talked about, and that will be unpleasant for your father and myself. Perhaps you haven't thought of that."

"I shall not get the *Morning Post* to advertise my visit."

"Nor will Oliver advertise it, Lady Dealtry, you may be

quite sure of that," said Palgrave. "Of course, he quite understands that for a time, at any rate, his career would suffer in this country, so he has decided to go abroad. He has offered his services to Italy, and is leaving England shortly."

"That is the very best thing I have heard about him this evening," said Lady Dealtry. "It proves that he is ashamed of himself."

"And Estelle Bocara goes with him, I suppose?"

"Yes, Sir Charles."

"What is her husband doing or going to do?"

"I wish I knew," said Palgrave, thinking of Oliver's visit to Lantern House, and then he added hastily: "I haven't heard anything about him for some time."

"And remember, she is Estelle Oliver," said Philippa, holding up the letter.

"Quite shameless apparently," her mother remarked.

"It sounds peculiar," said Palgrave, "but there is method in the seeming madness. The change of name is really significant. Madame Bocara has practically ceased to exist."

"What nonsense you talk, Gerald."

"I assure you it is a definite statement of fact, Lady Dealtry."

"She says he is quite a different woman in her letter, mother."

"I am sorry I cannot be more explicit," said Palgrave.

"Until you can we are in the position of children trying to complete a jig-saw puzzle with half the pieces missing," said Sir Charles. "It is an occupation which does not appeal to me. Lucy, my dear, let us forget Oliver and the Bocaras, and go and play billiards. Last night I gave you thirty and you beat me, tonight you only get twenty-five."

"You are worried, Gerald," Philippa said as soon as

her father and mother had gone. "It is not about Estelle's letter, is it?"

"No."

"What is it, then? I thought you were perhaps thinking of taking mother's advice and asserting your authority."

"I am not good at asserting myself at any time or I shouldn't be here at this moment. Oliver has gone to see Bocara tonight."

"What for?"

"To ask him for a dog which belongs to Estelle. That is the ostensible reason, and Oliver did not say a word to suggest there was really any other, but somehow I am convinced he must have some other reason. I told him it wasn't good enough running into danger for the sake of a dog."

"Danger!"

"Of course, Phil, there is danger with a man like Bocara. I wanted to go with Oliver but he wouldn't let me. If he had been going only about the dog he wouldn't have objected to my company probably. He wanted to be alone because he had some other reason for going. I argued to myself that I was idiotic, that of course he would be all right, that this was the twentieth century, and all that—you know the kind of way one reasons about such things, but I've been getting more and more jumpy ever since I came here. It is talking about him, I suppose."

"What other reason could Bruce Oliver have for going?" Philippa asked.

"It is mere guess work on my part, but I believe he has an idea that he can bargain with Bocara in some way. He is convinced that while Estelle was recovering after the operation, Bocara exerted his influence and succeeded in reaching her, mentally I mean. Now he is just as con-

vinced that Bocara's power is broken. Well, I believe he has an idea that he can in some way, by threats, perhaps, induce Bocara to come to terms, persuade him to agree to have the marriage annulled, or something of that sort. I told you Bocara suggested it the day he came to Hobart Place. I wish I had insisted on going with him tonight."

"I should think Bruce Oliver knows enough about Professor Bocara to take every precaution."

"Oh, he has a revolver, but seems to place more faith in an amulet he wears, one Estelle gave him. You know, Phil, he is a believer in all that kind of thing now, and while you listen to his arguments, you are inclined to believe in them too. It is only when you get away from him that you feel practical and ordinary. If Bocara is only half as subtle as Oliver thinks he is, precautions may prove futile."

"What time did Dr. Oliver go to Lantern House?"

"We left Hobart Place together. He would get there by about seven o'clock. He said he would look in at my chambers on his way back to let me see he was all right."

"What time do you expect him?" Philippa asked, looking at her wrist watch.

"I told him I was coming here, and he said he would wait for me. I could then tell him whether you were going to see Estelle."

"You can tell him I will. Today is Tuesday, and I am engaged tomorrow and Thursday, but I will go on Friday. I will write to Estelle and tell her I am coming."

"Oliver will be grateful."

"Why not 'phone to your chambers and ask if he has arrived?" Philippa suggested.

"That is a good idea, he might be there by now," and Palgrave went to the telephone.

Bruce Oliver had not been there, and the fact made Palgrave more anxious than ever.

"I am inclined to go to Lantern House and make sure he is all right, Phil," he said. "Of course he must be, but—"

"Perhaps it would be as well to go, Gerald."

"Then you feel uneasy, too?"

"My dear boy, that isn't extraordinary, is it? I have caught it from you."

"I'll get off at once. I have never been to the place but I dare say I shall manage to find it."

Philippa gave him some directions, but they were a little vague as she had always driven there, and had had no occasion to notice the way particularly.

"Ring me up when you get back, Gerald."

"It is certain to be late."

"I will not go to bed until you ring me up."

CHAPTER XIV

"She will come back to me, to her master. Think of that, Dr. Oliver—to her master."

1

HAD Gerald Palgrave questioned him on the point, Bruce Oliver would have declared that he had no reason for going to Lantern House beyond asking for the dog, yet subconsciously there was a half dormant idea at the back of his head that something might happen, that some opportunity must be given him to help Estelle to far better purpose than by merely getting Karac for her.

Something of the fatalist had developed in Oliver's character. Destiny seemed to have so ordered his actions recently, and even his thoughts, that no difficulty in his path appeared of much moment. He had only to go straight forward and it would vanish. Bocara might be revengeful, but if so, his revenge would be along certain lines, he would endeavor to ruin Estelle socially. This idea was so firmly fixed in Oliver's mind that the idea of personal danger never entered his head. Nor had it ever occurred to him to use threats in order to induce Bocara to remain silent. He was not going to Lantern House with any intention of bargaining, and yet in a vague way he expected more from his mission than getting possession of Karac. Bocara's power was broken, his influence over Estelle no longer existed, this was such a great achievement that Oliver stretched forward to the possibility that every link

between them must snap like a dry twig from which all sap had gone.

Silence reigned at Lantern House, that silence which holds mystery, or it may be death. Oliver felt this but it did not disturb him. He had felt it on each occasion when he had been there, and if it were more pronounced tonight than on former occasions it was only natural. Estelle was not there, and without her the house and its surroundings must seem strange to him. The next moment he was wondering whether anyone was there. As he went up the short drive behind the high wall he could not detect a glimmer of light from any of the windows. He was so conscious of the lifelessness of the place, so ready to find that the house was empty, so ready to accuse himself for not having come before, that the promptness with which his ring was answered was startling.

"Is Professor Bocara at home?"

The Oriental servant bowed, stood back to let him enter, and closed the door. A dim light from a copper lamp on a table at the other end of the hall served only to accentuate the shadows, and to make dark corners and recesses darker still. The house was very silent. The servant seemed little more than a shadow and moved without a sound. More than ever was it like stepping out of the busy, bustling West into the calm and deliberate East. The subtle scent of the East was strong, pervading everywhere, and any mystery might be lurking in the shadows.

The servant took him to Bocara's study.

"The Professor will come," he said as he opened the door.

From a lamp within a golden shaft of light pierced into the dimness of the hall. It was dazzling in its brightness after the dull light without. For just an instant Oliver hesitated, and it was at that moment a hand gripped his arm.

The servant had stepped back noiselessly to let him pass into the room, Oliver had heard no sound either beside or behind him. The attack was absolutely silent, and so swift, that although the first grip on his arm had put the doctor on his guard, he was given no opportunity to make a struggle. A band, thrown accurately, swept around him pinioning his arms to his side, and the band was caught and fastened behind him. At the same moment his legs were caught together, and he would have fallen forward had not a hand been put to steady him. Almost before he was aware of it his legs were securely strapped together, and then his arms were dragged back and fastened behind him at the elbow. He was in the hands of the two Oriental servants, one of whom must have been waiting just inside the room and gripped his arm as he had entered. The suddenness of the attack, its unexpectedness, and the shaft of light which had dazzled him for a moment, had all been against him, yet Oliver wondered why he had been so easily overcome. He was a strong man, he had struggled successfully against odds in times past, yet now he had fallen an easy victim. He had not been alert physically, perhaps mentally he had been half asleep when he entered the house.

The men completed their work in silence. Having tested their victim's bonds, they came on either side of him and, dexterously lifting him in a perpendicular position, carried him forward into the room and seated him in a large carved chair which was by the table on which the lamp stood. It might have been the same chair in which Estelle had sat in the little temple. They proceeded to strap him securely to this chair, and the leather harness was so complete, so exactly adjusted to its purpose, that Oliver could

not believe he was the first victim who had been pinioned there. These men must have had practice in this kind of attack to be such adepts.

"The Professor will come," said one man as both of them went and stood by the door.

Oliver had been given no time to struggle, now he had no intention of wasting his breath in asking questions which he was sure would not be answered. For a moment he had speculated whether he could possibly have fallen under Bocara's influence, so easily had he fallen into this trap, but he was alert enough now it was too late. The realization of his physical helplessness seemed to increase his mental strength and clearness of vision. He reviewed the situation quickly. As neither of the servants had gone to inform their master of a visitor's arrival, it was evident that Bocara must already know he had a visitor, and knew who that visitor was. He had, perhaps, watched him enter, secure from discovery in the shadows of the hall. He was helpless in Bocara's hands, and realizing something of what this might mean, Oliver cursed himself for refusing Palgrave's company. Why had he refused it? Because he was armed and wore a talisman. His revolver was as useless to him as a child's rattle, the ivory disc—even now he found courage in the consciousness that it was secure about his neck. His thoughts flew to Estelle, to the river-side cottage. What was she doing at this moment? Was she thinking of him? Would she, by the strange power that was in her, know that he was in danger? Would she be able in some miraculous fashion to succour him? For a little while he was in the mood to consider nothing impossible, and then despair caught at his soul. He was in Bocara's hands, in the hands of a villain who took life callously for some fanatical reason which possessed him. Oliver glanced at the two men standing motionless by the

door, then looked slowly round the room, taking in his surroundings with a studied completeness suggestive of an idea that the knowledge might presently be useful to him. A French window into the garden was open, a breeze moved the curtains slightly. It was a road to freedom, and although he could not move to take it there was a curious satisfaction in knowing it was there. If he could not go by it, there was always a possibility that someone might come that way to help him, someone out of the night, a casual passerby perchance. He looked down at the leather straps which bound him, moved slightly to test their security; there was no slipping free from such bonds as these, that was a futile hope.

Then the door opened and Professor Bocara came leisurely into the room.

3

"Ah, Doctor Oliver, have I not assured you often that you would always be a welcome visitor at Lantern House?"

Outwardly Bocara was perfectly calm, but there was suppressed excitement in him which caused him to feel for his words more than usual and to speak with a stronger accent.

"That is quite evident," Oliver answered. The very sight of this man roused his fighting spirit, helpless though he was. Bocara should not have the satisfaction of seeing fear, or even apprehension in him. If he were looking forward to playing the part of cat to his mouse he should be bitterly disappointed. Oliver was determined to adjust his tone to Bocara's, to speak as if he were a free agent, to forget that he was bound to that heavy chair.

"And how right I was when I said we should talk together again," Bocara said.

"As friends—I think that was your prophesy," Oliver returned.

"Of course. Enemies fight, do they not? There is going to be no struggling between us."

"I trust not. Why should there be seeing that I am Estelle's messenger to ask you for her dog, Karac?"

The Professor looked at him keenly, evidently astonished, and then he turned sharply to look at the two men still standing by the door. Their immobility had been suddenly startled into alertness. The statement had had an effect on them which Oliver did not understand.

Bocara said something to the servants in Hindustani, and when they had answered, seated himself at the table opposite to Oliver. He moved the lamp a little so that he might see him more clearly and study the expression on his face.

"So the dog has been calling you?"

"No, calling to Estelle."

"Ah, a little more and she would have come herself to fetch him. I have been a little careless, it seems. I should have exerted my strength a little more."

"You are mistaken, Professor. Not even to obtain possession of Karac would she come to Lantern House again."

"I know differently, my good Doctor. She will come, perhaps to occupy that same chair which holds you at this moment," Bocara returned. His voice had a sharp edge to it, whetted by anger, but he smiled, and turning to the servants said: "See what this so-called messenger carries with him."

One man searched, handing to the other the articles which were found in Oliver's pockets. In silence they were placed on the table. Bocara laughed at the sight of the revolver. He took it up and examined it.

"An excellent weapon and loaded. It would appear

that you were not quite sure about your welcome tonight. I wonder you did not use it, Dr. Oliver."

"Your welcome was too overpowering."

"Yes, I was ready for this visit. I have been expecting you every day."

Again there was silence until the servants stood back, intimating by a gesture that their work was completed.

"You will find a chain about his neck, take that, too," said Bocara.

The man quickly found the chain, and the ivory disc lay in the palm of his hand. He did not pass it to his companion, nor did he put it on the table. He looked at Oliver, then held the talisman out to Bocara and spoke in Hindustani.

"The touch of an infidel has defiled it," the Professor answered in English. "Put it down."

But the man still held it, glancing at his fellow servant, and after a moment's hesitation spoke again to Bocara in his native tongue, asking a question, it seemed to Oliver.

"Now it means nothing," was the answer in English. "Put it down."

"And carefully," said Oliver, speaking with the same deliberation as Bocara did. "It belongs to your mistress, and was given by her to her messenger for his protection."

As a drowning man Oliver clutched at a straw. It was evident the servants were astonished to find him in the possession of the ivory disc; probably they had asked their master for an explanation, and they did not appear to be satisfied with his answers. It might serve him, Oliver thought, to increase their doubt.

"Put it down," said Bocara sharply, angry at the man's hesitation, angry with himself perhaps for having given his servants the occasion to question him.

The man put the talisman very carefully on the table,

making a slight obeisance to it, at least Oliver thought so. It was evidently a sacred thing in the eyes of these men. Then they stood erect, looking at their master.

"You will do as I have instructed," said Bocara quietly. "You will leave at once. You will go where I have told you, and by the way I have told you, and there you will wait for your mistress. There is great reward for faithful servants."

Neither man made any answer. Both glanced at Oliver as they turned from the table, and they left the room silently. Not a sound came from the closing of the door.

4

"Now we can talk at our leisure, Dr. Oliver."

Bocara's anger and excitement seemed to have passed. With the dismissal of the servants he appeared to forget them and the questions they had asked. He might have been speaking to a friend, and his manner was almost an apology for having shown any annoyance.

"The servants have left the house," Bocara went on. "They went straight away from this room on the business I have appointed, so you and I are alone together and of our being disturbed there is no possibility. We can talk quite frankly to each other. You will pardon me, Doctor, if I smoke a cigarette. I cannot be hospitable and offer one to you because, unfortunately, your arms are bound. I am obliged to receive you in state, and those who take part in state ceremonies are usually obliged to put up with some inconveniences. I have seen you glance at that open window. It is the way by which I shall leave this room presently, but it is of no use to you. You will remain here. A shout would not reach any listening ears, and were you to cry out—well, I assure you it would be useless."

"Why should I?" Oliver asked carelessly. "Am I not your guest?"

"And Madame's messenger," Bocara returned. "You are rather more a messenger than a guest, I think, and I cannot believe you have come only to talk of the dog, Karac. I fancy you have come to bargain with me."

"I came only about the dog," Oliver answered.

"Are you only my wife's messenger, Doctor? Ah, an expression flits across your face like a shadow which makes me believe otherwise. I will do you justice. I think there is sufficient shame in you to make you desirous of bargaining with me."

"I came only about the dog," Oliver repeated.

"Then we will talk first about the dog, but afterwards about other things, because I am most anxious you should understand me thoroughly, Doctor. I have tried to explain myself to you before but you have failed to comprehend, perhaps it has been my fault, some Eastern shortcoming in me. You will let me talk fully, I hope, and without too much interruption, because I am a busy man with engagements to keep. That small silver clock on the table yonder is of exquisite workmanship, is it not? It is also right and keeps excellent time. In an hour we will bring our interview to an end. We shall not shake hands at parting. Once you refused, tonight it is I who will refuse. I shall just put my hand on your neck for a moment—this hand, and press a little spring in this curious ring. I cannot tell how long your passing will take, it depends upon your health."

"Yes, I know the poison," said Oliver.

"I think not."

"It is a serpent's poison, Professor, somewhat doctored. Now an expression flits over your face which shows me you are astonished at my knowledge. I have experimented with the poison to some purpose, and you will hardly get out

of England without being questioned concerning your use of it."

"My friend, you talk very bravely."

"Not bravely, but with knowledge," Oliver returned simulating a carelessness which he did not feel. "I think I know how long your passing will take. It will be sudden and in no way dependent on your health."

"What is the word you have in English?" said Bocara. "Bluff. You would have me think my garden is full of your policemen, but I know it is not so. It is as silent as the grave, and empty. You have come for Karac, you say, then for the sake of a dog you have come to your death."

"Estelle wants him, that is why I have come."

"And Karac wants her, very badly he wants her," was the answer with a short laugh. "I would have you understand me, Doctor. I do not talk very much, nor swear oaths as you English do. I plan and wait, striking when and where I can, when and where it will help me and hurt most those who are against me. And when two persons are mentally in accord, when there is subtle sympathy between them, I can sometimes hurt one by striking the other. I shall hurt Estelle by killing you, that is certain, but if the sympathy between you is sufficient, I should hurt her by striking you—say with a dog whip. No, Doctor, you need not fear, I am not going to do that. You are nothing to me, vermin only worthy of destruction, a man who, entering a man's house as a friend, robs him of his wife; why even your own people spit on you for that. To kill you is nothing, nothing at all, your own laws would sympathize with me and punish me only lightly. It is Estelle I would hurt for her infidelity. You were not in my power, although I waited for you, hoping you might be fool enough to put yourself in my power, but the dog,

Karac, was here. As you know, there is often a very subtle sympathy between the human and the animal, and I have used it for my purpose. I do not wonder Estelle heard Karac calling to her. She must have suffered much on account of it."

"What devilish thing have you done to the dog?" Oliver burst out fiercely. For a moment he forgot that he was tightly bound, and in a quick attempt to move he hurt his arms sufficiently to make him wince with the pain.

"He is chained to his kennel wall and is as powerless as you are in that chair," laughed Bocara, "and every day I thrash him with a heavy whip and think of Estelle. He is already a wreck of what he was, Estelle would hardly recognize him for her dog. She will come back presently and see him. That is certain, Doctor. She will come back to me, to her master. Think of that, Doctor—to her master. The beauty of love has gone from me, you have killed it, but passion remains. Love that is passionate is a fire, it is true, but it brings a warming heat and happiness; passion without love is a flame which only scorches and burns. So Estelle must suffer. The fault is yours, not mine. I change from slave to avenger. I shall no longer care to exert any subtle influence over her, I shall have my will of her by force, aye, if necessary I may even use the whip. Be careful, Doctor. It is useless to struggle. You will only hurt yourself again as you did just now."

"You are a devilish brute," said Oliver. "Thank God, Estelle is beyond your power."

"A car will take me very quickly to that house you have by the river," said Bocara. "Maybe I shall find my pleasure in the very place you have prepared to take your own."

"You fool!" laughed Oliver. "That house has been only a house of pain, prepared for it and for nothing else. An operation in that house has removed the cause which has helped to give you your power over her."

"An operation!"

"The removal of a very tiny bone splinter has made Estelle free. That is what I have done for her, and all your devilish schemes are henceforth useless. You did your worst while she was weak, but you utterly failed to influence her, and at last she knows you for what you really are. Why, you miserable hound, she would have you whipped from her gate if you showed your face there."

"You are very English," sneered Bocara. "You swear and bluster, and call names, and a man who can plan calmly and wait, as I do, is a fool, a foreign fool of no value. All you English think like that. We shall see, already I have done much. Time passes. I will tell you what I have done. It will interest you. I shall make you a confession which I know you will never betray. Tomorrow, or it may be a week hence, you will be missed. The will come seeking you and will find you dead. Another well-known man dead, just as Ockenden the poet is dead, and Scrivener, the politician who could think of nothing but an English Empire ruling the world."

He paused waiting for the doctor to show surprise.

"And Dupont," said Oliver. "Don't forget the Frenchman Dupont."

It was Bocara who showed surprise, and just for an instant he glanced behind him as if he wondered whether the garden was as empty as he imagined.

"Ah, you have heard of that? My confession interests you."

"Yes. I am a theorist in life," said Oliver. "Even the wriggings of a worm interest me."

Bocara lighted another cigarette.

"I have told you about my wife," he said. "Her life and experience as a child made her abnormal when she came into my care. I confess I knew nothing of your bone splinter, but I do know it is of no importance. You have used the knife to no purpose, for we have worked, she and I, on a higher plane of which you know little or nothing. Without any help from me the creed her father had taught her became blended with the religious rites she saw about her, and it was easy for me to foster this attitude of mind. She was at an impressionable age. I studied with her and became suggestive, but only at certain periods was my power of suggestion irresistible. At other times her own will guided her, but it was never in real opposition to the line along which I worked. I was patient and very careful. These periods of detachment in her were marked by the wise men and priests with whom we came in touch. They considered her blessed by the gods, and Estelle believed she had a mission. I had helped her to believe that, and it was my part to point out what that mission was. I saved her from the priests by marrying her. Yes, Doctor, I loved her, but there was work to do first, and I could wait. It was a great work for my country—for India."

"Not for Egypt?" Oliver asked.

"Indirectly, but for India first," and Bocara leaned forward and swept his hand out to clear away the blue clouds of cigarette smoke which hung about him. "Why should a great country like India be under the rule of the English? Why should the nations of Europe colonize and govern other peoples, alien to them in race and speech and ideas? I looked to the day when India and other peoples should arise and drive out all foreigners from their coasts. With the spread of education that day came nearer. It

was mind, not muscle, which had enabled the Western man to take his commanding position, and the man of the East, infinitely more subtle, deeper, more religious, more honest, had not yet awoke to the knowledge of his own powers. Education, by showing him Western methods, was helping him to awake, and I, knowing the West, saw that the ruling intelligence of the European nations lay with a few individuals, a statesman here, a thinker there, here a poet, there a soldier, and sometimes in a dreamer who had ~~had~~  realistic visions, or dreamed of world-wide empire. I asked myself what I could do, and the answer came quickly. If I could destroy some of these individual intelligences I should sap the Western power, and so help the East to its rightful pinnacle. More, Doctor, I saw that I could attack these men of mark and genius through Estelle. You are surprised, eh?"

"No, I came to the conclusion some time ago that you were entirely responsible for these murders."

"And you have not told the world? It is very astonishing."

"The world would have accused Estelle, as you intended it should do if you failed. I have waited until I could place the halter round the right neck."

"You might be a little dangerous were you free," said Bocara, "but the knowledge, the certainty, comes too late."

"Oh, no, the world will know. I have made that certain. That is why I am so sure that you cannot escape."

"Big words, but they do not affect me," said Bocara. "It may be, Doctor, that you have stopped Estelle from doing further work in the great cause which I have at heart, but she has done excellently. You have heard of Dupont, but listen, I will read you the names. They have all shaken Estelle by the hand, and a touch upon this ring, a sacrificial ornament, part of her ritual, and behold death.

No one has suspected the teacher of Oriental languages."

"It is different now," said Oliver.

"When you are found they may begin to wonder about me, but then—then I shall not be found. Listen to the names."

He read them from a paper which he took from his pocket. Many of the names Oliver knew, they were all prominent persons in one direction or another, and were of all European countries. Two of them were women. The names of Scrivener and Ockenden closed the list.

"Sometimes I have failed," Bocara went on. "The link between myself and Estelle has snapped at the crucial moment. It was so when I tried to kill that arch-dreamer of Empire, William of Germany. I failed."

"That failure, at least, seems a pity," said Oliver.

"But failure has not come often. I have fought against those who are leaders of men, who have the greed of dominion, who for the supposed benefit of their own race would enslave other nations. I have had great success, these names prove it."

"I do not quarrel with your ideals, only with your method of carrying them out."

"Ah, you do not quarrel, then you comprehend a little. I am a dreamer and I have knowledge of the gods, even as Estelle who has fallen from her high calling. I should not kill you, I think, did I not hate you in another way. Your name should have been on this list already, but you are another of my failures. There is a reason. You have worn that ivory talisman. Oh, yes, there is virtue in it or I would not have tried to prevent Estelle from giving it to you. You see my faith and belief. You have the talisman no longer. In your case it is personal enmity which prompts me rather than any distinction you have won in your profession. That enmity came when I first

saw you cross the threshold of this room, came as a warning from outside this world, and since then it has grown hour by hour until tonight. And tonight will not end it—it is endless. I curse you, hate you as gods hate those who mock them. In life and in death I hate you. I curse you beyond the grave and pray the gods to torture your soul in whatever existence there is for you hereafter. If forgetfulness be a blessing, then may the keenness of your memory ever increase, if hell means punishment then may its hottest fires sear you forever. Or if your soul must live again on earth, may it inhabit the foulest reptile the earth or the sea contains, some hunted hopeless thing which knows no rest, day or night, from the myriad relentless enemies."

Intense hatred gleamed in his eyes, yet his voice was not raised, nor did he move, nor make any gesture. Such calm ferocity fascinated Oliver, and in spite of his knowledge that in a few minutes this man's hand touching his neck would bring death, he was interested in the strange, mad personality.

"You think love and your operation have altered Estelle," Bocara went on after a pause. "You think she is free from my influence, but it is not so. I laugh at you, spit at you. She may be changed a little during those times when she has always been mistress of herself, and that will not matter to me now; but the other periods will certainly come. When she is herself I shall be her master, as much her master as man ever was over a female slave purchased in an Eastern market place, when she is under the spell I shall be her mental guide and she shall work my will. I have planted in her convictions which cannot be eradicated, have formed her mind in such a way that neither potion nor lancet can alter it. She is blessed, or cursed, as you please, by the gods, and so she will remain."

always. She will be under my will physically and mentally, in both she shall obey, shall be for my pleasure when that is my will, and when I choose shall bring death suddenly to whomsoever I would destroy. And some day, when I am utterly weary of her, I shall cast her aside as a fruit picker casts down rotten fruit. Lacking my guidance, my subtlety, she will kill, thinking she strikes at evil. She will bungle in her method, and the world will call it murder. Some clever person with a long memory will think of other deaths to lay at her door—I may myself tickle the memory of some such person into liveliness, and then prison and a felon's death for Estelle, or the madhouse, it may be. See what you have done for her. I should like to let you live to see the ruin you have brought upon her, it would be torment, hell for you, but I have confessed too much to run that risk. You glance at the clock, yes, the moments pass quickly. You look at the window, yes, it is a way of escape but it is one you cannot take. I laugh at you, Bruce Oliver, type of the Western fool who despises such a man as I am. What would you not give to be able to call me friend at this moment, and I—I spit on you."

Oliver had looked at the little silver clock, and then at the window. The breeze from the garden stirred the curtains, slightly for a moment, then strongly as if a hand had caught and shaken them. Not a sound without spoke of approaching help, yet he looked, staring, wondering at the sudden agitation. It ceased as suddenly as it had begun, the curtains only swayed, the folds falling curiously. They bulged a moment, then slowly fell apart, and Karac's head was thrust between them.

"It is the time, Doctor. The hour has gone, and——"

The angry snarl, the show of white fangs, the bound forward were almost simultaneous. It may be that Karac had not recognized his enemy until Bocara spoke. The man had no time to spring from his chair before the dog was upon him. Instantly alive to his danger, Bocara thrust out his hand to seize Oliver's revolver which was on the table, but the dog's powerful jaws snapped upon the outstretched arm almost as if the animal perceived his enemy's intention. The man's fingers touched the weapon but could not grasp it, and the weight of the dog's furious attack flung him from the chair to the floor. The table was shifted but the lamp stood firm. Oliver wished that the light had been thrown down and extinguished, and the horrible sight hidden from him.

It was a struggle to the death between man and dog. They rolled over each other, breaking, overturning and displacing furniture in their horrible encounter. Books on shelves were pushed back in disorder as man or dog struck them, a priceless vase fell and broke into fragments and dust, the little silver timepiece slid to the floor as the small table on which it stood was broken and collapsed, even a picture on the wall was brought down by the dog as he leaped to prevent the man from rising to his feet. The table on which the lamp stood escaped and Oliver was doomed to be a helpless witness of this fight to the death.

Bleeding, the man struggled to keep the dog from his throat, and once his steel-like fingers gripped the dog's throat and he succeeded in forcing the animal's head to the floor. If he could maintain that grip, if he could hold on, he might strangle the dog into limpness and reach the weapon on the table. He exerted every ounce of strength he possessed to accomplish this, but the dog was mad with fury and writhed to free himself. The man could

not hold him. With a growl the dog shook himself free from those gripping fingers, and fastened his teeth in the man's shoulder. Striking the animal's head with his fist, Bocara tried to throw him off, but the effort ended in a sudden relaxation and the dog was standing over his enemy, tearing at him with bloody jaws and pounding forepaws.

Oliver shut his eyes, even salvation in this guise was horrible.

Hands and wrists and arms the dog tore at, as the man still struggled to protect his throat. Nearer and nearer the dog's merciless jaws tore at him, no signs of failing strength in the animal. The fight was speedily becoming a worry. The man no longer attempted to rise, nor to creep towards the table, nor even to slip from under the animal, he was past all that, his whole efforts were concentrated in thrusting back those deadly jaws, and his efforts, each moment growing feebler, seemed to give the dog new strength and determination.

"Help! Oliver. Help!"

It was a cry sharpened by physical agony, a cry of which the brain must have been unconscious. Bocara's mental power was snapping. He forgot that the man he had successfully schemed to render powerless was bound and could not move a finger to help him. He forgot that he had arranged that the house should be empty except for himself and his victim.

"Help!" he cried again, not to Oliver this time but to the wide world.

The dog snarled savagely worrying closer to the man's throat.

"Karac! Lie down! Karac! Karac!"

Oliver shouted to the dog, a command, then a persuasion, but Karac heeded neither. He was at his moment of victory and revenge. Nothing short of a bullet in the brain

or steel thrust through his heart could stop him. Even Estelle herself could not have called him off now. He worried closer, crouching his powerful body to the task, then got his hold and shook his victim like a rat. Bocara's lacerated arms fell apart, helpless, quivering for a moment as they lay widespread upon the carpet.

"Karac!"

The dog released his hold, looked at Oliver, then came to him, limping a little, a tired animal, his body marked with the brutal thrashings he had received. He nosed the straps which bound Oliver, then lay down at his feet, his head resting on one outstretched paw, while the other was doubled under him as if to sooth and protect some wound.

"Karac!"

The dog looked at him without raising his head, then with a long weary sigh lay quite still.

6

It was thus that Gerald Palgrave found them. He had rung the front door bell two or three times, and thoroughly alarmed at receiving no answer, had gone round the house into the garden, and to the lighted window. Bocara lay there, bloody and still; the dog was stretched out in an unnatural position; and Oliver, bound in his chair and with his eyes closed, looked limp in his rigid bonds.

"Good heavens! Oliver. What—"

"The dog is dead, too," was the answer.

Oliver woke with difficulty from the lethargy which had overtaken him. His mind must have had a period of utter blankness for he took up life again from the moment when he had seen Karac stretch himself at his feet with a movement of the paws like the rat which had died in his laboratory, like Ockenden when he fell across Lady Dealytry's dining table.

"The dog is dead, too," he repeated. "Either he bit upon the ring or Bocara managed to use it."

Palgrave unfastened the leather bonds, and directly he was free Oliver stumbled across the room to Bocara.

"Dead," he said after a pause, "worried to death. And, by God, he deserved it!"

His figure stiffened as he spoke as though a wave of sudden strength had flowed through his limbs, as if only at that moment he had freed himself from the lethargic state and realized that Gerald Palgrave was in the room.

"It was horrible, Palgrave, and all the time I was in that chair—helpless. He called to me for help—to me!"

"Tell me what has happened."

"I was trapped—bound. He intended to kill me—the same way—the ring is on his finger. Then the dog came. But for the dog——"

"Thank God you are safe, Oliver."

"Yes," and Oliver looked a little vaguely round the room. "Yes, it is almost strange to be alive. I have been down to the gates of death, and life seems unreal. It wasn't Bocara—he didn't frighten me nor put faintness into my heart. It was the fight, the horrible struggle between man and dog."

"Perhaps there is some brandy about," said Palgrave. "You want pulling together."

"Not here. I wouldn't touch anything here. Bocara is dead, Palgrave; Estelle is free. Thank God she is free."

"We must get the police," said Palgrave. "The sooner you are out of this the better."

"The police! Yes, of course, they ought to come at once. Wait a moment. There is a paper—it was on this table. I don't think he put it in his pocket," and Oliver searched the floor with his eyes. "No, here it is."

"What is it?"

"Evidence. Evidence that I am not a cracked-brained fool," and Oliver laughed. "That friend of mine at the Home Office—the official mind—this paper will be a shock to the official mind."

"You can tell me about it presently. Let us get the police," said Palgrave, anxious to get Oliver out of the house as soon as possible. He would not get full grip of himself until he was out of the place.

"One moment. Perhaps I had better leave the other things, but I must have this," said Oliver, taking up the ivory talisman and putting it into his pocket. "I would not part with it for a fortune. It has saved my life again. It is strange to think that the man who wished to kill me actually saved me. Bocara made his servants take it from my neck, and for them it held some meaning, spoke some message of greater import to their souls than all Bocara's commands. They knew I was under the protection of the high gods."

"You must tell me the whole story presently, Oliver."

"They have fled as Bocara ordered them, but they must have unchained Karac before they went, perhaps led him to the window yonder, and left him to work the will of the gods and save me."

"We must get the police," said Palgrave, taking his arm.

Two special constables were on duty near Lantern House; and they were the first to investigate the mystery. One remained with Oliver and Palgrave outside the window of the study while the other went for assistance. A visit to the police station followed, and the dawn was glimmering Eastwards before Oliver and Palgrave were free to return to town. A belated taxi took them part of the way.

"We'll go to my chambers, Oliver."

"Anywhere. It doesn't matter."

"I promised to ring Phil up when we got back to tell we were all right."

"But—— What is the time, then?"

"She will be up I expect."

She was. Palgrave just told her they were safe, and that everything was all right. He would come round and see her in the morning. She must wait in for him. Yes, he would tell Oliver she was going to see Estelle on Friday. Yes, Oliver was here.

"You had better speak to her," said Palgrave. "I do not think she is quite convinced you are safe."

Oliver took up the receiver.

"Hallo! Yes—yes, quite all right. Sound tired, do I? So do you. Very sporting of you to sit up. Yes, it has been an exciting evening. Gerald will tell you about it in the morning. Yes, so I hear—on Friday. Awfully glad you are going, it will do Estelle no end of good. Good-night."

Palgrave meanwhile had mixed him a stiff brandy and soda.

"Get outside that, Oliver."

"An excellent prescription," Oliver answered, setting down an empty glass.

Then in detail Bruce Oliver gave his friend an account of everything that had happened that evening at Lantern House.

"And Estelle is free," he went on rather excitedly. "Think what that means. I wonder whether she knows it to-night," and he took out the talisman and fastened it round his neck. "I think when this was filched from me she must have felt it, has perhaps been tossing wakeful all these hours; now it is in its place again she may sleep. To-morrow, no to-day, in a few hours, I must see the man at the Home Office, perhaps the authorities at Scotland Yard, and then—Estelle."

"You had better turn in for an hour or two," said Palgrave.

"Will you promise not to let me sleep round the clock?"

"I will have you out not later than ten."

"Then I will get some rest. I want it. Thanks, old man, for coming down there after me. I was wrong not to let you go with me, but I was right when I said the talisman was more protection than the revolver, wasn't I?"

"I wonder."

"Does that mean doubt or an open mind?"

"I think it means an open mind," Palgrave answered.

From Bruce Oliver in Italy to Gerald Palgrave in London.

Villa Bella Vista,
Fiesole.

MY DEAR GERALD,

Your letter arrived yesterday, and a day or two ago a belated number of "*The Queen*" came into our hands with an account of your wedding and a portrait of Philippa. Wasn't the bridegroom considered handsome enough to grace these pages? Or are you left out on purpose to set people speculating upon what kind of a man so charming a bride can have set her affections? I thought it was to be a quiet affair, but your wedding occupies more space than any other in the paper. I suppose the armistice has made all the difference, and no doubt the number of Philippa's V. A. D. friends made a really quiet wedding an impossibility. Besides, there was Lady Dealtry to be considered, of course. A really quiet affair would not have pleased her. Well, here's the best of luck to you both and some day before long, when the world has really got peace and travelling is not so terrible an undertaking, Estelle and I hope to see you out here. Your account sug-

gests that London did not go as mad over the armistice as might have been expected. In Florence the rejoicing was great, and I am told there were a few wild hours in Rome. Thank God it has come, and please God a new era in the world's history, and a better, is about to open.

You ask when we are likely to return to England. Some day, perhaps, for a visit, but permanently, never I think. Except to a few, the mystery remains, and I trust it will remain. I am a little afraid of England because, although the authorities are satisfied, our appearance would certainly set some tongues wagging and would occasion a lot of questions. I want to keep Estelle from all annoyance of this sort.

Moreover, we are in love with our home here on the hillside of Fiesole, so why should we step out of Paradise. For it is a Paradise, and good Italians know it, and have been fighting and dying for this land of beauty and romance. Below the loggia in which I am writing there is a terraced garden, our garden, just now a perfect riot of color with a sombre yet stately note at one end of it where half a dozen tall cypress trees stand about a circular stone seat to which tradition gives an age of centuries. Beyond, and below the garden, is Florence, the city beautiful, with the dome of the Duomo, Giotto's Campanile, and the Tower of the Palazzo Vecchio standing out sharply in the clear air, almost in detail.

I have given you some details of my work here, and Estelle's. I am chiefly engaged in the Florence hospitals now, and Estelle seems to know all the poor and needy. Asked the other day whether she was a Roman Catholic she replied: "Yes, if being a Roman Catholic means trying to be good." Rather a delightful answer, wasn't it?

Truly I hardly know how time has passed since Estelle and I were married in that old village church by the river,

Philippa, Martha Houghton and you the only witnesses. It almost seemed as if we were doing something wrong, something we were ashamed of. It took Estelle quite a long time to get rid of the impression, she felt it would have been much more natural to have come away with me as we had originally planned. I should say this to no one else, but you will understand. The hours I have spent with hurt men back from the front trying to mitigate their sufferings have often seemed long enough, but those spent with Estelle have been dream-like and have flown. It seems only yesterday since I first saw her, a sort of dryad priestess in her sylvan sanctuary. And then at times we seem to have known each other, to have been in touch with each other's soul, not for years, but for centuries, from the old past ages. Perhaps this is the real truth, I don't know, I am still only a pupil in these studies, but I progress. Here she is loved, more than loved, and it is easy to understand why Hindu priests considered her blessed by the gods. She is normal in every way really, and yet not a bit like any other woman. This is not lover's talk, my dear Gerald, but truth as I am learning it more intimately every day. Truth is for her, and is becoming for me, a compound of all that tends towards good, and to believe in this and to act in accordance with it is religion. Religion cannot be a fixed mental state, to make progress religion must be ever in flux. Likewise, beliefs must expand and must ever seek to sound profounder depths, and not rest content with the truth as the world understood it two thousand years ago. What is all progress and civilization for but to increase our wisdom and our vision? Surely we should apply our increased knowledge to religion more than to anything else! Childhood has beliefs, a storehouse of them, which we have gathered together into so-called fairy tales, but the essence of these tales, the inner

meaning of them, is true, and they form the foundation of the beliefs held later when the child has grown to manhood. The child finds romance in toys, within the four walls of its nursery, in the winding paths of its father's garden, finds romance, truth and belief; while I, a man, find them in the music at the Church of the Annunciata, in the art in the Pitti and Uffizi, in the view of Florence from Fiesole, in an evening star burning over the folded Appenines. Everything which uplifts is good, and to be uplifted is progress towards perfection. Do not imagine I have let go of old beliefs, I am only understanding them better. I am Christian, not Pagan, only I am beginning to see that there are no bounds to Christianity, that its simplicity is full of unfathomable depths, that the wisest of us are mere children growing towards understanding, that we just carry a rush-light which is sufficient to show us how little we know, that creed and dogma are mainly a school course to prepare us for that wider Christian reality of which as yet we know so little. In this schoolroom, the world, we all work towards the Great Truth, the heathen by worshipping his idols of wood and stone, the Hindu, the Bhuddist, the Mohammedan by the system and ritual into which he was born, and all the wisest enter gradually into a brotherhood of spiritual understanding. They have come out upon the Highway of which Estelle speaks, into which all the byways lead. The fact is, we stress too much our life here, and this makes even the best of us too materialistic. In the East, though not calling themselves Christians, they have grasped something more of the spiritual than we, and therefore have climbed towards truth. In a way they have misinterpreted, I believe, but they are not far from the Great Highway, and some day, maybe, they shall send missionaries to the Western peoples who are in jeopardy of strangling the

spiritual with law and dogma, and of losing essential truth in trying to fit new enlightenment into doctrines which held truth only for the times for which they were intended. It is putting the new wine into old bottles.

You see, my dear Gerald, Estelle's influence is strong upon me, and I thank God for it, the God who made us all mentally and physically. I grow more humble. How can I, a Christian, judge my brother Mohammedan, the Bhuddist, anyone, when God made him and allows him to think differently, and leaves him to approach him by a road of which I have no knowledge. This universality is Estelle's religion, and daily is more and more becoming mine. Not in this world, in this dispensation, shall all men travel by the way of the cross, but I believe all roads lead into that great Highway which runs through this life, and out beyond it, far, far out, beyond time, beyond this world's existence until at last it reaches the Almighty. And sooner or later, I believe, all shall travel it, and God Himself shall know and rejoice that not for one single soul of His making did He die in vain.

How I preach, but you must not be angry with me. It is Estelle's influence, and I seem to have found my own soul and must speak of the faith that is in me to a friend.

Do you remember a young flying man who was at the Dealtrys' the night Ockenden died? I met him in Florence recently—on leave from Salonika. I remembered his face and spoke to him—Withers is his name. He came out here and stayed with us for a day or two. He seems to fancy that a man who has burst through the clouds of earth into the eternal blue, and flies alone where there is no sound save the throbbing engine and the singing wires of the aeroplane, knows more about God than anyone who walks the earth. Perhaps he is right. I can almost fancy

that airmen will come to have a special religion of their own.

Twice Estelle has called to me from the garden, and I must close, and apologize for writing at such length.

With our love to you both,

Ever yours affectionately and gratefully,

BRUCE OLIVER.

THE END

ER.

